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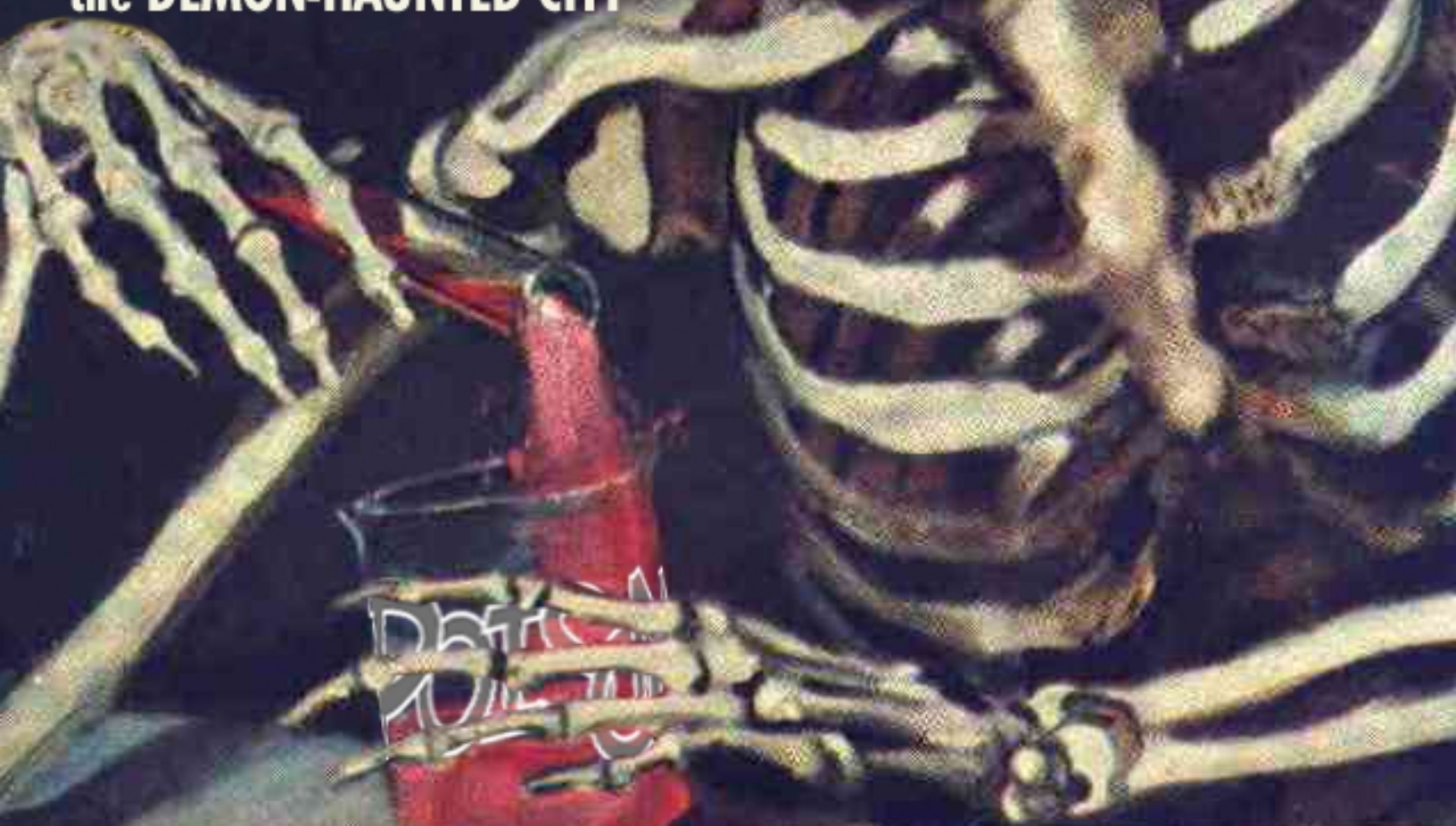
Printed

POISON

in this issue,
ALL-NEW stories from:
Brian Cain
Jack Draper
Ron Fortier
TP Keating
Cavan Scott
and...

SEPTEMBER 1933

more **DIABOLICAL CHILLS** in
Part 3 of Henry Ponopscotch's...
"the **DEMON-HAUNTED CITY**"



PLEASE SUBMIT!
PRINTED POISON NEEDS YOUR
WORK!

Printed Poison is a bi-monthly (struggling to be monthly), pulp-inspired webzine. We are seeking fiction and art submissions.

Our guidelines are as follows:

Fiction

- We are looking for pulp-inspired, two-fisted fiction. Mystery, adventure, horror, science fiction, and western are all welcome.
- Try to write your stories as though you are living in the 1930s. (You can set your stories later than that, but then they'll be science fiction!) Don't think of it as a restriction, think of it as a writing challenge!
- Violence and sex in your story is fine. But try to keep it to the level you'd get in old radio dramas – the Shadow, Sam Spade, X Minus 1, and the like.
- If the term “pulp” is new to you, check out the article “Pulp Paper Master Fiction Plot” by Lester Dent in issue 1 of *Printed Poison*. The stories we accept do not have to conform to this master plot, but it captures some of the soul of what we're after.
- Writing quality should be good but we're not expecting works of genius. We want pulp-inspired stuff, so we're shooting for Dent, not frickin' Joyce.
- Word count: 1,000 – 10,000 words, but we can accommodate longer and smaller pieces.
- **Please spell-check your work!**
- Send all fiction submissions or proposals to **printedpoison@yahoo.com**

Art

- We are looking for black-and-white interior artwork of all sorts. 1930's era and pulp-inspired, of course.
- We prefer drawings to photos. Comics-style is perfect.
- Currently, the next few cover images are sorted, but we'd like to see new ideas.
- Send art submissions and/or queries to **printedpoison@yahoo.com**

All these guidelines are just that: *guidelines*. Don't be afraid to ignore them.

PRINTED POISON IS:

Poisoner-at-large } Henry Ponopscotch
 Art Director

Contributing editor Jack Draper

Publisher Martin Scribbler

CORRESPONDENCE

Please direct all *Printed Poison* correspondence to:

printedpoison@yahoo.com

Printed POISON

Volume 1, Issue 3



September 2003

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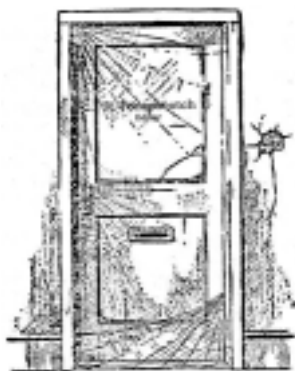
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Slip us a message!

Printed Poison is published on a write-ware basis. Simply put, this means we'll keep coming out with issues as long as people send us stories to publish and emails of encouragement. Everybody who contributes to *Printed Poison* is doing so for nothing. That's why the zine is so cheap. Cheap, as in free. So keep that filthy lucre in your pockets and send us some emails... filthy or otherwise!

printedpoison@yahoo.com



FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK...

Pulp art sucks me in every time. To this day, when I look at the cover of issue 1 of *Printed Poison*, I go, "Holy crap! That palooka's about to get his bean boiled!"* and I want to open the mag and see how he gets away. He doesn't of course, because our covers have nothing to do with what goes on inside. So the poor guy's perpetually on the verge of getting his face fried and there's no relief in sight. Ain't we the dickens...

To date, all the art we've used has been culled from real, live vintage pulps. Issue 1 is a combination of a *Phantom Detective* (April 1936) and a *Fantastic Adventures* (October something-or-other). Issue 2 came from *Science Wonder Stories* (from I-don't-know-when), while issue 3 is a detail from the *Shadow* magazine with "the Crimson Death" in it (August 1941). As for the interior art, it comes from all over, but mostly from various *Shadow* magazines (downloadable at www.theshadowmagazine.com).

This issue though, we actually have some original artwork to pitch at you.

First up, accompanying the "Demon-Haunted City" instalment, we have some fantastic and stylish headshots of all your favorite Magicians' Guild characters by Katey Ashcraft. She went way above the call of duty and dealt with yours truly directly to bring these characters to life. Katey's clearly a talent and did an enormous amount of work for the zine. You can't imagine how grateful I am.

Next up, accompanying Ron Fortier's "Angel in His Sights," we have an illo by the mighty Rob Davis. It's a thrilling piece of penwork he put together for us, and I'm knocked out to be able to run it. Cheers, Rob!

Yessir, it's a good lookin' issue, this *Printed Poison* number 3. Hard to believe an ugly mug like me has anything to do with it.

Henry Ponopscotch
Editor-at-Large

* thanks to Scott Moore. Letters, Issue 2

OUR CONTRIBUTORS

Brian Cain likes peanut butter, muscle cars, women and guns. He lives in the San Francisco Bay Area, but hopes he doesn't die there.

Jack Draper has never been seen by anyone in the Printed Poison office and the only evidence of his existence we have been offered is a newspaper clipping with a grainy photo of a man in an overcoat at Joseph Conrad's funeral. The caption reads, "Among the Mourners: Jack, Draper, Pays his Last Respects." That this image is in fact the renowned pulp writer and not merely a fabric seller coincidentally named Jack cannot be confirmed.

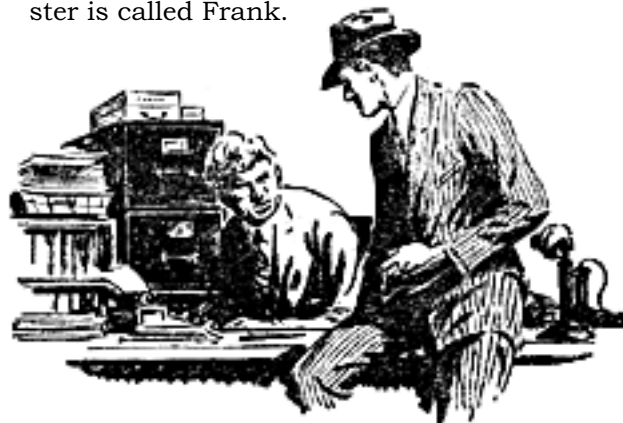
Ron Fortier is a 50 yrs old baby-boomer, Vietnam vet living and writing in the wilds of New Hampshire. He knows a lot about angels, having been blessed with several including his wife, two daughters and three grand-daughters. His three sons and one son-in-law are hardly angels.

T.P. Keating lives in London, where he is 58,836,701st in line for the throne. His website is www.tpkeating.com, and you can e-mail him at keatingwrites@yahoo.com.

Doctor Macabre has worked in the publishing industry for the last 500 years. He founded *Saucy Tales of the Supernatural* after another publication fired him. He had, in a fit of rage, mummified the copy editor after finding that she had dangled a preposition.

Henry Ponopscotch is the editor of *Printed Poison*, the magazine you are reading right now. He'd like to thank you for that.

Cavan Scott is a professional magazine editor residing in the green and pleasant land of Great Britain. He has also script-written three official audio plays based on the long-running BBC science fiction series, Doctor Who and is currently writing a full-cast Judge Dredd production to be released in 2004. His pet hamster is called Frank.





CHAPTER THREE: SANCTUARY DEFILED

Tenderly, Mama Quixo touched the chalk outline of a hand, her fingertips caressing the asphalt. *Max, you idiot*, she thought to herself, wishing she could with this gesture reach back across time and comfort the man who'd lain here dying. *You should have stayed at the theatre. You'd have been safe there.*

The air was humid, the clouds a tease, filled as they were with the nagging damp of an impending storm. From the far end of the alley, two uniformed police officers were walking toward her. They were joined by a third who was doing up his fly after stepping from behind a dumpster a couple of yards away. The business of carting away bodies and scouring the

Printed Poison

The Demon Haunted City

by Henry
Ponopscotch

*Mama Quixo, the Amazing
Hypnos and Swami Jim
search for clues about
Manhattan Max's murder
as Professor Deadmoor
must face a mysterious
doom!*

area for clues was drawing to a close — *too soon, too soon*, Rose thought — and as their shift had ended they were hurrying off, glad to be leaving this grim scene. The leftmost of them was bearing toward the white silhouette traced on the pavement. Mama Quixo glared up at him and catching her disapproving look, he sidestepped around the outline.

Behind her, where the alleyway opened onto the street, Randall Diamond was concluding a conversation with a plainclothes detective. They nodded to one another and the detective walked off to leave instructions with a small retinue of police who would remain at the scene and keep watch through the rest of the night. Meanwhile, Randall walked over and joined Mama Quixo.

"Take as long as you need, Rose," he said.

"Thanks," she replied, "Such generosity from the detective. Did the Amazing Hypnos have to svengali him?"

"Nothing so devious. The boys-in-blue drink for free on Sunday nights at the Hex. You could say their clubhouse owes mine. Big."

Rose chuckled as she stood up and patted Randall's arm. "I knew there was a reason we kept you around."

"Figured anything out yet?"

"The cops in this town are bunglers," she replied.

"I mean besides that."

She looked around herself in disgust. "Look at this. They scuffed up the whole scene. More interested in cleaning up so the press won't have anything shocking for the front page than they are in collecting evidence."

"I don't know about all that," said Randall. "I was just talking to Detective Helmsley. He seemed like a good man. Square jawed. Steely eyed. A stalwart defender of truth and justice."

"Pfff..." Mama Quixo said. "And what did Detective Helmsley have to say?"

"It was an ambush-"

"Obviously."

"Would you let me finish?"

"A child could have seen it was ambush."

"There were nine shooters arrayed above the alleyway. Three on each of the fire escapes. There," he pointed up into the gloom to the iron catwalks affixed to the side of the building to the north, "and there," indicating a similar structure on the building to the south. Then he pointed up above the building. "The last of them, three more shooters, were there. On the roof to the south."

"He can count bodies. Very impressive. I feel much better knowing Detective Helmsley's fingers are on the case."

"Ahem," Randall cleared his throat then continued. "Witnesses reported hearing a series of gunshots, so many that it sounded almost like a crackle, followed by an explosion and then silence. Max was found with a revolver in one hand but it hadn't been fired. So Helmsley figures he was taken by surprise and gunned down, knocked flat on his back, in this initial flurry of shots, and then-"

"Oh ho. He was, was he? Shot up by surprise assailants? Then who was it who dispatched all these gunmen?"

"Max's accomplices," Randall said, and Mama Quixo's jaw dropped.

The Amazing Hypnos continued: "Revolvers were found there and there," he said, indicating two chalk circles, one against each of the buildings on either side of the alley. "All their rounds of ammo had been spent. So, the offi-

cial, operating hypothesis is this: Max was walking down the alley flanked by two confederates. When they were set upon by gunmen and Max was killed, these two associates ran to opposite sides and returned fire. Once the gunmen on the fire escapes started dying and it became clear that the tables had turned, somebody on

one of the roofs must have dropped a bomb of some kind to knock out Max's accomplices. The explosion missed its mark, however, and they weren't killed. But it was enough to scare those two into dropping their weapons and fleeing the alleyway. End of story."

"And you believe this... this..." Rose stammered, "This poppycock?"

"Well, it is only the *operating* hypothesis," Randall said. In the darkness, she could not see the grin on his face. "Once they examine the area in the daylight they expect to learn more."

"The daylight?" Mama Quixo raged. "It's going to storm in a couple of hours. They'll be lucky to find anything in the rain and once it stops half their precious evidence will have washed away."

"Detection is an inexact science. Subject as it is to so many variables. Rain. Wind. Dark, uncomfortably humid nights. What more can you expect of our poor benighted law enforcement officers?"

"Accomplices? It's as if Manhattan Max were some common criminal skulking around with henchmen."

"He was a gambler, Rose. Came into contact with a lot of shady types. Everybody knew that. Helmsley thinks this might be mob related. His debts caught up with him, maybe. Or one of his schemes had run him afoul of a local family. Who knows? Maybe his Three-Card Monte game was a front for a vast criminal empire?"

"Schemes!? Debts!? Criminal empires!? I can't believe my ears!" Mama Quixo ranted, then she stopped and looked over at the hypnotist.

"You know in this light," Randall Diamond said, "and when you're angry like that, you are a very beautiful woman,

Rose."

Mama Quixo smiled. "It's as black as pitch in here."

"But your anger glows."

"Are you finished?"

"Are you going to enlighten me with your ob-



MAMA QUIXO

A renowned psychic and medium, she is known as "Rose" to her friends.



THE AMAZING HYPNOS

A world famous mesmerist and owner of Club Hex, as Randall Diamond he sings with the Winston Tricks Orchestra.

jections to the working hypothesis? Or will you just start swearing now?"

"My objections are so numerous it's hard to know where to begin."

"Try the beginning. Max is walking down the alleyway, when..."

"Your Detective was right about one thing - *one* thing, mind - Max was the first one to fall, but Helmsley assumed he was taken by surprise and that he'd be incapable of defending himself."

"In the detective's defence," Randall said, "Max was a doddering old codger..."

Mama Quixo glowered at him.

"... to the casual observer," Randall added. "We know his real talents but to the rest of the world he was a card sharp past his prime."

"Ignorance is no excuse for making bad assumptions, especially when there's evidence that contradicts them. Why, for instance, would these fictitious accomplices of Max's run directly out to the left and right when there's a perfectly good dumpster a couple steps down the alley?" She pointed toward the large, metal garbage receptacle that sat a few yards away against the north wall. "It would have provided better cover than crouching down in a corner. It's the obvious place to hide. And the snipers knew that. They'd have to. Look at where they were set up. The guys on the fire escapes were four stories up on the north side and five on the south. The ones on the roof were six stories up. When you consider that the night is overcast, moonless, starless, and the one streetlight is giving off a feeble ray at best, you realize that our ambushers would have been firing into shadows. For Max, the best cover would be to take none at all and just stay calm. As long as he stayed put he'd be almost impossible to see."

Mama Quixo stepped around to the bottom of the chalk outline and looked down at it. "Ex-

cuse me, Max," she whispered, then turned to face away from it.

"He knew running would be pointless so he didn't even try. He just fell down," she said to Randall as she lay down with her back upon the pavement, the shape of Manhattan Max encircling her.

She aimed her hands like pistols up at the fire escapes. "Pop-pop-pop-pop-pop. Twelve shots up into the darkness," she said, "while the ambushers are blasting away at the dumpster and the wall. Max is watching for their muzzle flashes, of course, and from this angle he has the advantage. Despite the clouds, there's still a tiny amount of light coming down from the sky; it's a faint reflection from the city but it's enough to give him a silhouette of what's above him. And, what's more, the muzzle flashes from the guys on the roof are lighting up the guys below them."

"Meanwhile, Max is lost in the dark," she continued. "Sure, they can see his muzzle flashes too, but they're gunning for somebody who's ducking and running around scared. So they're confused because he just keeps shooting up at them. They probably think he's darting back and forth across the alley, knocking them off one by one." She aimed one imaginary gun down toward her feet. "He took a shot or two out into the street too and a couple more back the way he came." She aimed her other imaginary gun over her head. "I think we can safely assume that there were assailants at either end of the alley, you see."

"We can, can we?" Randall asked.

"Of course. If there hadn't been, Max could have sprinted out of the crossfire. I'm surprised at you kiddo. That should have been the first thing to occur to you."

"I am such a fool."

"By now, Max is out of ammo," Mama Quixo looked at her imaginary pistols, then mimed tossing them away. "So he throws his guns off



SWAMI JIM

Rahul Khan picked up the nickname "Swami Jim" growing up in an orphanage in New York City. Now he uses it on stage when he performs as a mentalist.



JACK GREY

Though some claim his skill as an escape artist exceeded even Houdini, Jack Grey ultimately abandoned the stage.

to the sides — bam-bam — your revolvers in the corners. “

“Very nice,” Randall said.

“Then he pulls out his back-up weapon, and...”

“And a grenade!” Randall concluded.

“Yes. He’d dispatched all the shooters above him, but whoever was left at the entrance to the alley, he hadn’t been able to get them, and the six shots he had left weren’t going to be enough. So...” A worried look came over Rose’s face. “... an act of desperation. It must have happened so fast.”

“Judging by the scorch marks,” Randall added, “it was a flash bomb of some kind. All fire and noise, but no shrapnel.”

“Yes...” Rose’s voice trailed off. Then, “Whoever they were in the street, they must have been serious customers,” she said. “And Max must have been expecting them. As far as I know he wasn’t in the habit of carrying around explosives.”

“Here let me help you up.” Randall bent down and offered her his hand. She took it and stood, dusting off the embroidered, red satin of her oriental-styled dress.

“What do you think of the new working hypothesis?” she asked.

Randall took the hand he was holding up to his lips and kissed the back of it. “Astute as always,” he said. “Sometimes I think you actually can speak to the dead. And frankly, from the way you describe it, I’m surprised Max didn’t make it.”

“I am too. But let’s face it, lying here like that, he’d be harder to spot than if he’d been running around making a target of himself, but not impossible. And there’s still the question of these last shooters at the head and tail of the alley. Despite the grenade, despite the bad light, they still must have got him in the end. Who were they?”

“What do we do now?”

“I think first things first we grab Gertrude and Grimalkin then go across the street and see if we can find those stray slugs Max fired. After that, we go hunting for the bad guys who got away.”

Randall Diamond and Mama Quixo stood in silence for a moment and took a last, sad look at the chalk outline where Manhattan Max had died. Then they turned and walked back towards the police tape and the crowd of report-

ers and onlookers who were still hoping there might be another gory detail uncovered at the crime scene. And as the two of them neared the police officers who were keeping watch over the area, Rose stopped and surveyed the alleyway one last time.

“There are angry ghosts here,” she said, just loud enough so those nearby could hear her.

Randall cocked an eyebrow at her.

“I don’t mean it literally, of course,” she whispered to him. “But they had him trapped and outgunned, and he was an old man. They must have figured this would have been an easy job. Little did they know how much the murder of Manhattan Max would cost them in the end.

Can you imagine how annoyed they must be right now?”



MANHATTAN MAX

He was a fixture on Coney Island and the police turned a blind eye to his Three-Card Monte game for many years. Max enjoyed playing the ponies as it was the only game of chance he couldn’t cheat at.

Once Mama Quixo and Randall Diamond had left the crime scene, two of the police officers on duty got to talking.

“Hey, did you see who that was leaving just now?” said one of them, an older beat cop.

“Yeah,” said the other. He was much younger, a new recruit to the force. “That was Randall Diamond. He owns Club Hex. I seen his act a couple a weeks back, but I tell ya, that fellow sure can’t sing. Two songs in and my girl, she wants me to take her back home. Guy’s a mood killer, I tell ya. I hear he’s not a bad hyp-a-natist though.”

“Nah, not him. The old bird with him. You catch a glimpse of her?”

“His mom maybe?”

“Do they come much greener than you?” wondered the veteran officer aloud, shaking his head. “*That* — and pay attention to this, tenderfoot — *that* was Mama Quixo. The psychic.”

“A psychic? Here? You’re pulling my leg.”

“Nope. Sometimes, if the detectives get themselves stumped, they’ll up and call her in to work a case. They say she solved the Rimbaldi murders in three hours even though the department had been working the case for eight months. They say she can talk to the ghosts of dead people.”

“Ghosts? Aw, nuts to you. There’s no such thing as ghosts,” said the rookie. “They’re just in dime novels and bedtime stories.”

“Nuts to me? Listen tenderfoot, when you’ve walked a beat as long as I have, you get to seeing some pretty strange things. After a few years

of this, you won't be such a skeptic."

The rookie chafed at the older officer's comments. "I guess if you're a dried up old crone like that," he muttered, "you might as well talk to dead people."

"Mighty strange thing that," said the veteran, ignoring the younger officer's comment. "This must be some doozy of a mystery if they're calling her in now. They usually wait till a case is cold and things are really desperate before they bring in Mama Quixo. Yep. Mighty strange."

Rahul Khan was wandering through the hallways of the city morgue searching for Chief Coroner Arthur York. This wasn't something he was technically supposed to be doing. In fact, the law had strict provisions on how and when civilians were permitted access to a morgue. For instance, they certainly were not allowed to poke their heads into autopsy rooms and say, "Is Coroner York here?" something which Swami Jim had done several times already, but over the years, security at the city morgue had become lax where he was concerned.

The first time he'd entered the morgue unsupervised, it was several years ago while he was investigating on behalf of the Magicians' Guild a series of ritualistic murders that had occurred in the city. He arrived in the foyer of the building that afternoon in 1927, exchanged pleasantries with the security guard, then said, "There is a body here of a man from Connecticut. I don't know his name, but the initials L and T are associated with the case file and he was a victim of the Goat's Head Killer. Chief Coroner York is expecting Detective Franklin from the Bridgeport Police Department. May I go up and see him?" To which the security guard replied, "Of course, Detective Franklin. Go right up," and provided the mentalist with directions on how to find the coroner's office.

Swami Jim was then able to inspect the recently discovered corpse, question the chief coroner, and leave the building in the possession of a great deal of secret information about the Goat's Head Killer case. At no time did anyone question the fact that the name Franklin seemed out of place when attached to someone of obviously Indian extraction. And they wouldn't have questioned it either except for the fact that four hours later the real Detective Franklin showed up for his scheduled meeting, thus exploding the entire ruse.

Just before the security guard could be demoted, Rahul Khan showed up at police headquarters and confessed to what he had done.

He only avoided a prison term for impersonating a police officer by showing how he hadn't at any point misrepresented himself as the Bridgeport Detective — the security guard had come to that assumption on his own. And it didn't hurt Rahul's position any that in addition to this confession, he brought to police headquarters the Goat's Head Killer.

Baffled by how he could have led them astray, the coroner and security guard compared notes later and came to the conclusion that the mindreader must have plucked all his information about Detective Franklin and the case from the security guard's thoughts.

In fact, he had done nothing of the sort.

The morning papers had reported that the body of a man from Connecticut had been found and was believed to be another victim of the Goat's Head Killer. They did not, however divulge the man's name as the police hadn't released this information yet. After reading the story, Rahul Khan had phoned the Bridgeport police department, allowed the switchboard operator to assume he was a newspaper reporter, and learned that the investigating officer — one Detective Franklin — was en route to New York and thus unavailable for comment. That his visit to the city would involve a meeting with the chief coroner was a simple matter of deduction.

As for the initials L and T, these were merely a guess and weren't those of the murdered man. His name was Timothy Unger. The L.T. associated with the case file was Detective Louis Tubman, the officer who had found T.U.'s body. The security guard had put the initials together in this way on his own, and Swami Jim was savvy enough to know that people were always finding connections where they didn't necessarily exist.

Since this incident, the succession of security guards posted at the city morgue have deemed it best to just smile and wave the mentalist past their check point for fear that he would read their minds. Consequently, over the years, Rahul and Coroner York became friends of a sort, though their relationship was often a strained one as their encounters usually consisted of the mentalist wheedling information he should not have out of the city official.

This was another of those cases.

Rahul eventually found Coroner York as he was racing from his office. He was in such a hurry, in fact, that the men almost collided.

"I was half expecting you, Rahul," said the coroner. His tone was friendly, but he was obviously distracted and eager to leave. "I'm sorry

though. I really don't have time for our games today."

"Something has gone wrong, Arthur. I understand. You must implement some damage control. Find out who is to blame and reprimand him."

"I didn't say that."

"No. That's true. Please, I will not hold you up for long. You must understand, Arthur, I am in earnest about this case as well."

"I know. But look, I can't talk now," Arthur said sharply. "Maybe if you come back tomorrow I'll have something for you. Right now things are—"

"Yes, yes. It was foolish of me to come so late. You are obviously tired and cranky. I should have expected no less considering you were called from a deep sleep and greeted with news that seven bodies are on their way to your slabs."

A short but telling pause passed between the men. The coroner shifted his feet. "As always Rahul, you know at least as much as I do about what's going on around here. Look, go home and get some sleep then come back tomorrow afternoon — *late* afternoon — and pick my brain

then. There isn't a lot of night left but I have tons to do here before it's over."

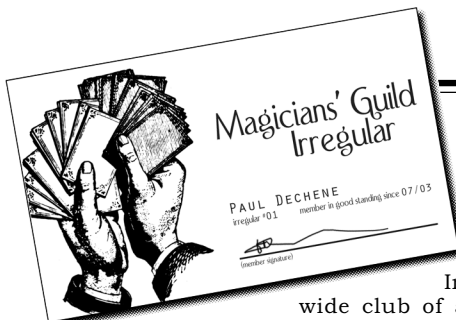
Rahul smiled and patted the coroner on the shoulder. "Shoo, Arthur," he said. "I release you to your knives."

And the two men parted.

To anyone who came upon this scene accidentally and overheard this conversation, it may have sounded strange but they would have learned little from it except that Arthur York was tired and busy. But to anyone who had wandered through the city morgue as Swami Jim had, overheard what he had overheard, seen what he had seen, and used the keen senses that he had to observe Coroner York's posture, intonation and manner, this exchange would have been very enlightening.

And thus, Rahul Khan left the city morgue wiser than he had been on entry, but more troubled. He'd made a discovery he had to share with the Magicians' Guild at once.

Professor Deadmoor had taken a circuitous route from Manhattan Max's rooming house to the Emperor's Own theatre. A walk that under



Join the Magicians' Guild Irregulars!



Guild Membership Quiz

Answers to these questions can be found through careful reading of the first three chapters of "Demon-Haunted City."

1. What is Professor Deadmoor's first name?
2. What are the names of Professor Deadmoor's two assistants?
3. Where was Swami Jim born?
4. What band does Randall Diamond sing with?
5. What is Jack Grey's current occupation?
6. What was the *real* date of Manhattan Max's Mermaid Theatre show in 1920?
7. Which Magicians' Guild member died December 31st, 1899?

Send answers to printedpoison@yahoo.com.



The Magicians' Guild Irregulars are a worldwide club of amateur illusionists, conjuring enthusiasts, and fans of Magic. Like the Regular members, they strive to uphold the Code of the Magicians' Guild and maintain the Principles of Modern Conjuring in the face of Injustice, Ignorance and Inhumanity. Unlike the regular members, the mortality rate for the Irregulars is slightly lower!

Join and you will...

- ☞ be the first to learn about new developments at *Printed Poison*, the official magazine of the Magicians' Guild!
- ☞ receive a personalized membership card! Front shows your name and individual Irregular Member Number! On reverse, the Eight Principles of Conjuring!
- ☞ receive a fold-and-assemble Mini-Magic Dictionary so you can brush up on important conjuring lingo!

Show you've got what it takes!

Take the Guild Membership Quiz (at right)! Send your answers to printedpoison@yahoo.com along with your name (as you want it to appear on your card), email address, and your home city. If you score high enough, you will become a full-fledged Magicians' Guild Irregular, entitled to all the rights and privileges that go with such an honored title!

normal circumstances would have taken him forty-five minutes had taken close to two hours. And during that time he had travelled as a middle-aged woman in housecoat and slippers, a poor drunkard in a raggedy overcoat and dented hat, a gangly newsboy who seemed a touch too tall for his age, a business man coming home late from the office, and Donald Wilder Sr, the movie actor.

As he stood now on the back steps of the theatre, he was about as undisguised as he ever was, wearing the three-piece pinstripe suit he favored for when he was walking about town and would not mind being recognized but still wasn't courting attention. And though he had taken all these precautions to avoid being followed, from the moment he'd lain hands upon Max's book he had been unable to shake the feeling that unseen eyes were focused on him no matter where he walked.

Thus it was that as he pushed open the backstage door and entered the theatre, he stepped cautiously, filled with a sense of foreboding.

It took only a short time before his premonition of danger was fulfilled.

He was walking past the green room when he realized that something was not right within the Emperor's Own. Some change in the air. Some noise perhaps that was too quiet for him to consciously hear but had tickled his ear nonetheless. Something had shifted. Something was wrong, he was sure of that. So, instead of making for the elevator and his concealed apartments, he walked with purpose toward the stage manager's area which sat in the wings just off to stage left. He flipped several levers, activating the house lights, and moved several others whose purposes were known only to himself and his most trusted assistants.

What am I preparing myself for, Max? he thought to himself. *Should I have read the book first? Did you leave the answer there?*

Doubts filled his mind, but he drove them away. He knew that what happened next would have to be improvised for his intuition told him he had but a few seconds to make final preparations before stepping out onto the stage.

He heard the person enter the theatre before he saw him. It was a tall man who pushed open the doors opposite the proscenium and strode down the centre aisle. He wore a cloak of Victorian vintage, the hood pulled up over his head, to conceal his features.

Professor Deadmoor stood motionless in the centre of the stage, his face lit from below by the floor lights.

The cloaked figure spoke. "Ah, the famous Professor Deadmoor." Though his accent was cultured, his voice was raspy and his pronunciation labored. "I am surprised to find myself here. I was expecting a worthy adversary, not a theatre buffoon known more for his expensive costumes and fake blood than his skill."

"The theatre is closed for the night," the Professor replied calmly. "Perhaps you could come back tomorrow and heckle me."

"What? Leave now and miss your final performance. I don't think so, Deadmoor." He stopped seven rows from the stage and drew back his cowl. "That would ruin what has been so far a very entertaining night." His face was a blasted wreck. Most of his hair had been scorched off leaving behind only a few singed clumps. His skin was blackened and crusting over, in places it was flaking off. Where his left ear had been, there was now only a dripping mound of gore, and where a chunk of his left cheek had been burned away, his teeth showed through. His eyes though seemed undamaged and glowed with an evil light.

"It doesn't look like Max left you in much condition to be out on the town. Are you sure you should be making veiled threats like that?"

"At least I'm not in the morgue, Deadmoor!" shouted the figure, his mouth frothing with spittle. He paused a moment, then said more calmly, "Nor am I alone."

He closed his eyes and bowed his cadaverous head.

Upon the walls of the theatre, shadowy forms as black as jet rose up, numerous monstrous shapes, all claws and fangs. Silently, they glided toward the stage, their talonous appendages outstretched, eager for murder.

From behind his back, Professor Deadmoor drew two rapiers and readied them for battle. Their slender blades were made of gleaming steel, their handguards unornamented and functional. These were no mere stage props. "You are clearly one who has had some experience with those in my profession," he said. "You should know better than to attack a conjuror in his own theatre."

Professor Deadmoor shifted his left foot and depressed a concealed switch. Deep beneath the stage of the Emperor's Own, secret machinery sprang to life.

...continued next issue ♀



The Red Ruby Kill

by Brian Cain

A gun moll. A mob boss. Two hapless thugs. And a fortune in jewels. It's just another fishing trip for Jack Slayton, P.I. and his buddy Detective Sam Bennett.

I crawled down the hallway of the cabin as the voices outside grew in volume. Maybe I could find a weapon in the bedroom. I looked under the bed, through the dresser drawers; finally, I found a short-nosed Colt revolver under the cushion of a rocking chair. But my luck ran out as soon as I opened the revolver's cylinder. The gun was empty.

A door crashed open down the hall, and suddenly the big booming voice of Big Jake came through loud and clear as he began ordering Kelly, the cause of all this trouble, to whip up some grub for him and the boys, while they looked at the booty – a batch of red rubies that had been hidden away for too long. She argued that she didn't have anything in the cabin, went to town for meals; the sharp sound of a slap reached my ears, her yelp made me cringe.

I felt under the mattress of her bed, under the pillows, checked in the nightstand. No bullets for the Colt. Great. I had to face down three armed men with an empty gun. I could probably count on Kelly to jump in and help, but would she turn on me after?

Only one way to find out.

Two days earlier, I'd been sitting at the edge of a quiet lake, a fishing rod in my hand; next to me, my buddy Sam Dillon, his own rod and reel in hand, both of us on comfy beach chairs with a cooler of beer and sandwiches between us.

"They're just not biting, Jack," Sam said, drawing his line back slowly.

Jack was me – Jack Slayton, and I didn't care

if the fish were biting or not. "Look around, Sam. The trees, the clear blue sky, the birds, the quiet – you'd rather go back to the city?"

"I'd rather catch dinner."

"I think there was a seafood place in the last town we passed through, we can get fish for dinner there." I scooted down in the chair, drawing my line back.

Sam drew his in all the way, drew the reel back and cast off another line. The lure plopped into the water.

We packed up a few hours later, Sam deciding the seafood place was better than nothing. A couple of buddies told us the fish at Haviland Lake were always biting, but not today.

The seafood restaurant was in the town we'd passed before reaching Haviland, and I stopped at a small gas station to fill up before we hit the road. I jammed the gasoline nozzle back into the pump after filling the tank, turned to get back in the car, and froze at the sight of the woman across the lot in the snack shop.

It couldn't be, but I was sure it was. She hadn't changed a bit. Still slender with long dark red hair falling in curls past her shoulders and I remembered her having the prettiest brown eyes you'd ever seen and a husky smoker's voice without the smoking.

It looked like she lived in the area judging by her white cotton dress and the fact that I watched her tuck a small bag in her purse, then strap the purse to the back of a bicycle and ride off in the direction of the town.

I slid back behind the wheel of my convertible and from the passenger seat, Sam said, "You should have talked to her."

"It's not what you think."

"Oh, sure," he said, winking.

"That woman is supposed to be dead."

Sam gaped at me as I drove off, the town fading in my rearview.

"I'm not kidding," I said.

"Who is she?"

"I *think* Kelly Riordan. Ran with a gang that ripped off a half million dollars in red rubies six years ago. Disappeared when her friends were rounded up. She got away but never turned up, so everybody thought she'd been killed somewhere. They never found the rocks, either."

"I remember the case," Sam said. "Are you sure it's her?"

"I can't believe there's anybody else looks like her, but maybe I'm wrong. Worth a look, though."

"We came up here to fish, Jack."

"There's a \$50,000 reward out for her."

"The fish aren't biting anyway," Sam said.

I made a U-turn.

We approached the town once again. Welcome To Haviland a sign said.

"Know anything about this place?" I said.

"Only the guys at work said it had a great fishing hole but they were obviously lying."

The center of town had shops and restaurants; small grocery stores and a bank. Two hotels and a theatre topped it off. I pulled into the lot of the Royal Haviland Hotel and we climbed out.

It didn't take long to check in; they had plenty of vacancies. The lobby had a hardwood floor, a nice sitting area, and a small lounge. We carried our fishing gear and bags up a flight of stairs and down a cool hallway to our double room, set our gear on the beds. I opened the drapes and looked out at a section of town with mountains in the distance.

"Are you sure about that woman?" Sam said.

"Ninety percent."

"But with the kind of cash you're talking about," Sam said, "no way she'll expose herself like this, it's too easy."

"Been six years," I said.

"Nobody forgets rocks worth a half million. Every cop and bounty hunter in the country is going to be after her. Somebody would have found her by now."

I shrugged. "Turns out to be nothing, what's the waste?"

"I can't brag about the fish I caught."

"You can brag about more than fish if I'm right. And the fish weren't biting anyway, remember?"

Sam shrugged.

I said, "Come on, crooks have huge egos, you know that. I wouldn't be surprised if she ditched whatever disguises she's been using because she thinks it's safe. Seen it a gazillion times."

"I still think this is crazy."

We started unpacking. Sam frowned as I removed a thick belt with a huge buckle on it from my suitcase.

"What is that?"

"My Big Texas belt," I said. "See? Says Big Texas on it."

"That buckle is huge."

"Hey, I figure if we're gonna do the outdoor thing, I better look like a good ol' boy, right?"

We started right away. Sam took the phone over to the writing table, with a pad and pen, and started making calls. He wore the rank of Detective Sergeant on the police force back home in the city of Las Palmas and said he planned to start with the Records desk to see what they had on the girl.

I took off for the library after getting directions from the hotel clerk. I was a lowly private investigator with a small office back home in the city of Las Palmas and didn't have anybody to call to do my legwork for me.

I pushed through the double doors and felt a blast of stuffy air right away, despite the fact that every window in the place was open. The library wasn't very big but certainly had enough room – including a space for kids, parents, and a gal in a clown suit who was reading to the kids and had already made up a batch of balloon animals judging by the amount on the floor and in the hands of kids.

I stepped up to the information desk and a young – and bored – girl looked up from a math book.

"Hi," I said. "I need to look at some old newspapers."

"We have them on microfilm."

I gave her the dates. Kelly and her gang had run amok in Las Palmas, and the library carried both major LP papers. The girl handed me two rolls of film, saying an entire month's worth of papers was recorded on each roll.

I had to sign for the film, so I scrawled *Jack Slayton* on the check-out sheet and gave the girl a smile. She didn't smile back.

The microfilm machines sat along a row against a wall. I sat down in front of one, rolled the film into place, flicked on the light and watched the display.

A knob on my left cycled through the film and I sped through several weeks, finally catching the front page story on the last jewel robbery before the cops moved in on Kelly's gang and she vanished without a trace.

The story said that a satchel of red rubies worth a \$500,000 had been stolen from a wholesale distributor in what the cops believed had been an inside job. They never found the insider, but tips from informants led them to the gang's hideout.

I read some more and memories starting clicking. The cops showed up, shot it out with the gang, killing several; arrested the boss, Carl Mason, who, along with the three other gang survivors, were still in prison.

Carl Mason may have been in charge but the real ringleader, which came out in the trial, was

Big Jake Roscoe. Never caught despite a nationwide manhunt and a listing on the FBI's Most Wanted list. Kelly shared the list with Big Jake.

I didn't have any luck with the pictures the paper printed. They were grainy mug-shots and Kelly had her hair tied back, her eyes blood-shot; I couldn't tell if it was the same woman I'd seen outside the gas station or not.

Sam had better news. He'd called a mutual friend of ours at the FBI office in Las Palmas, Dick Lewis, who promised to send a copy of Kelly Riordan's file to us at the hotel.

By then we were both starving, so we found a hash house, and took our time with dinner.

We figured we had a day or so before the file arrived from the FBI, so we found some time for fishing at a small pond on the west side of the town. I even wore my big Texas belt despite Sam's making fun of it. We cast lines and drew them in over and over again but didn't catch anything. Not even an old tire. Where the heck were the fish?

The next morning, when we returned from breakfast, the desk clerk said we had a package. Sam snatched it and we returned to the room. I ordered up a few bottles of Coke, tipping the bell boy a buck when he showed up with the bottles, and cracked one open while Sam's eyes bounced back and forth as he read.

When he finished, he asked if I wanted a peek, and I said, "Show me the pictures," and we spent time passing the mug shots and other photos of the gang back and forth like they were baseball cards.

There were two pictures of Kelly Riordan, and we each took one and hit the pavement, asking shop owners, waitresses, people on the street, if they'd ever seen her before. That evening, we met up at the hash joint for supper and compared notes.

"Nothing," Sam said.

"Same," I said.

He let out a breath. I took my Kelly picture from my shirt pocket and examined it some more. It only showed her head and neck; the girl I saw at the gas station had the same hair, same slender neck. I wish the picture showed more.

"Maybe we should just pack it up," Sam said.

I just looked at the picture.

"Seriously, I don't want to spend my vacation on a wild goose chase." He sipped his coffee.

I put the picture down, glancing up as the waitress arrived with our meals. As she leaned forward to put our plates down, I glanced across her back, spotted two men at the counter looking over at us. They faced forward as the waitress retreated.

Sam and I dug in. I said, "Don't look behind you, but I think we've picked up some attention."

"Really?" Sam swallowed a bite.

"Two guys at the counter," I said.

"How 'bout that?"

We had some pie after our dinner. The two guys at the counter ate and had their own pie and plenty of coffee. Drinking that much, it was only a matter of time before one of them had to hit the men's room. One of them slid off his stool and sauntered on past. I gave him a quick glance as I swallowed some pie. Sam watched him over my shoulder.

"Well?" he said.

"Wish we brought the other pictures from that file," I said. "I think I saw him in one of them."

Sam frowned. "Dick didn't say any of them had been let out."

"Maybe not all of them were arrested," I said.

"When that guy gets back, let's settle up and leave. See what they do."

"We don't have any guns, Sam."

"You got your big belt buckle."

"Against a .38?"

"I pity those two," Sam said.

We let the sun set, left the restaurant, and made a left turn around the corner of the building to a small parking lot. It wasn't very well lit. A streetlamp on the sidewalk cast a little light, but it did little good. Sam stopped to light a cigarette and that's when the two palookas from the counter rounded the corner, separating a bit, approaching us. I continued babbling something to Sam while he blew out a stream of smoke and tossed his match on the ground.

"Hey!" one of the palookas said. We turned with a couple of "Who me?" looks and they went right into it, the guy closest to me going into an upper cut, his buddy drawing some brass knuckles.

I blocked the uppercut and hammered my fist into the guy's mouth, splitting his lip; kicked him in the right knee. He hit the ground, drawing his right leg up to his chest. I gave him a mouthful of my right shoe, shutting him up. Sam was ducking a dodging the other palooka's

brass knuckles as the guy made awkward swings, Sam's cigarette bobbling up and down between his lips. I moved in, Sam stepping into a swing, pivoting on a heel, and bashing the guy with his elbow. I wrapped an arm around the guy's neck, squeezing tight, Sam slamming a double-punch into the guy's gut. I felt his hot breath on my arm as all the air went out of him, unwrapped my arm, let him fall.

Sam flicked the ash off the end of his smoke, blowing out a stream. I picked up the palooka's brass knuckles and wiped them on my shirt.

"Souvenir," I said.

Sam knelt down beside the guy, began patting him down; I did the same with the second goon. Cash, car keys in his pockets. No ID.

"Bingo," Sam said, holding up a motel key from the first palooka's pocket. "Gray's Inn."

"It's up the block," I said. "Let's shakedown their room."

Sam nodded, sucking on his smoke.

Twin beds, no bathroom. Suitcases sat on either side of the beds; Sam and I went to work. He started with one suitcase, opening it and dumping the contents out, while I hustled through the dresser drawers, tossing out shirts, underwear, a watch. Nothing of interest except a Colt .45 auto with a full clip. I tucked it in my belt. Found a .38 in another drawer and jammed that in my belt, too.

I moved over to the second suitcase as Sam moved to and opened the nightstand between the beds. Nothing in my suitcase except a shaving kit and two extra clips for the .45 in a side pocket.

"Anything?" I said to Sam, who was looking at a picture he'd pulled out of the nightstand. He showed it to me. Kelly Riordan – and it looked like it had come from the same file we had; I said so to Sam, who flipped it over.

"It did. See those markings?"

A date and time and location of where the picture was taken had been typed out.

"That's FBI notation, no doubt," Sam said.

"Look at me," I said, drawing both pistols. "Jack 'Two-gun' Slayton, meanest outlaw in the west."

"Gimme the .38, I found a box of shells."

I tossed him the .38 and he tucked it behind his back.

The phone rang.

We froze, staring at the phone; it rang again and we stared at each other. I mouthed at Sam to pick it up. He shrugged, put the receiver to his ear. "Yeah?"

He listened. I could hear the voice on the other end, just barely. Sam said, "Okay," and then the other voice stopped, and I heard a click. Sam shrugged again and put the phone down.

"He thought I was Frank," Sam said.

"What kind of voice?"

"Deep, real smooth," he said.

I had some more Coke sent up to our room back at the Royal Haviland Hotel, and Sam grumbled because we couldn't get any scotch and soda. I said, heck, let's ask the bell boy, but he said no, a cop has to follow the law. I said that didn't stop half the beat cops in his department from taking a handout from the bootleggers, and he told me not to mess with a man with a .38 in his belt. I said nuts, I got the .45 and a Big Texas belt buckle, he had no prayer in the world. The bell boy knocked on the door and brought my Coke in before Sam could snap back.

While I tipped the bell boy Sam went through the FBI file on the jewel robbery, and showed me a group photo of Big Jake, the ringleader of the gang, and his goons - minus Kelly Riordan.

"See those two on the left?"

I took the photo from him, handing him a bottle in trade. Yup, no doubt. The two clean-cut boys walking next to Big Jake were definitely the palookas who jumped us outside the hash house. Dave Warner, the palooka who liked brass knuckles, and Ray Newton, the one I'd tangled with.

Down the hall from our room was a deck overlooking the street. We wandered out there and sat down, the cool night air a welcome relief after the evening's activity.

"So what do you think, Jack?" Sam said.

"We're not the only ones who've seen Kelly in this town," I said. "They obviously caught on to us with all of our snooping around today."

We talked about it some more, but all we could decide to do was keep looking, because we were obviously on the right track, and the scent of all that reward money was getting stronger and stronger.

We went back to the hash house for breakfast the next morning, sitting down at the counter. The waitress said we were getting to be regulars; Sam had the juice to ask if that meant he could get a free cup of coffee. The gal laughed, said only on his 100th visit, and Sam quipped he probably wouldn't live that long, he had a terminal disease. She said miracles happen,

Printed Poison

that he'd be paying for his coffee and everything else.

I was working through a plate of flapjacks when Sam jabbed me with his elbow, tilting his head to the end of the counter. A young woman had just walked in, wearing a white sundress, her long dark red hair tied back; she and the waitress exchanged pleasantries and the waitress handed her a box of food. The girl said thanks, passed the waitress a few bucks, turned and went out.

Sam mumbled something and I hopped off the stool, heading for the door. I heard Sam calling out for the check as I pushed through the door after the girl, dropping to one knee to pretend to re-tie my shoe as she climbed onto a bicycle - the same bike I saw at the gas station - and started pedalling away.

Kelly Riordan, no doubt.

I had to hustle to keep up with her, but she didn't go very fast, and she finally stopped at a small cabin about a mile north of the town limits, following a dirt road all the way.

The cabin only had one story, nothing but open, rough land all around. Trees for cover, one of which I squatted behind as I examined the place. What looked like a cooking pit had been dug off to the right side of the cabin.

Footsteps crunched behind me. I put my hand on the butt of the .45 in my belt and waited, watching Sam emerge from some brush. I waved him over. He took a knee beside me, taking out his .38.

"Well?"

"She's inside," I said. "Probably enjoying her breakfast."

"Let's see if she has any coffee."

Sam led the way and I kept a few feet behind him with the .45 in both hands. Standing to the side of the door, he knocked, shouting, "Hello! Anybody home? Our car is stuck, can you help us?"

I frowned at him. She was never going to believe that. He shrugged. A shotgun *click-clacked* behind us, and a rich feminine voice said, "Drop those guns."

I raised my hands above my head, letting the .45 dangle on one finger. I turned, facing her, Sam behind me; she told me to drop my gun, and, since I'm not one to scratch up a fine firearm by just dropping it anywhere, bent down

to set the pistol on the ground. Sam fired over my back; the girl yelped, and I covered the distance between her and I in two seconds, catching her in a flying tackle that sent us both tumbling across the rough ground.

Sam reached us, snatching up the shotgun from where she'd dropped it. I rolled Kelly Riordan onto her stomach, pulling her arms behind her. She kicked and struggled as blood leaked from the earlobe Sam had nicked with his slug. He stood in front of her, the .38 straight and level in his hand.

Sam said: "Knock it off."

She stopped kicking, breathed heavily under me. I swung away and covered her with the .45. She stayed flat.

"Don't just stand there, get it over with!" she said.

"We're not here to hurt you, Kelly," I said. She snapped her head around to me, her face still flushed red, anger burning in her eyes. "We know who you are and we know you've got the rocks, and some of your old gang has tracked you here, too, so be glad we found you first."

"I don't have the rocks."

I laughed.

"Not here!" she said. "You think I'm stupid?"

"At least you didn't call us liars."

"If anybody's looking for me it's Big Jake so if I don't throw in with you I'm finished. I'll split with the both of you if you let me go."

Sam said, "No dice, honey."

"Can I get up off the ground?"

We let her sit up against a tree, told her to keep her hands in sight. We stood over her without putting our guns away.

"You two don't know what I've been through," she said. "After we stole those rubies six years ago I double-crossed the gang and split. Thought I'd killed Big Jake, but my slug didn't hit anything vital. I only wanted to run off on my own, get away from the gang and the city and everything in it. I'll give the rubies back. I'm doing fine out here. There's plenty reward out for just the stones. Just let me go."

"We're police," Sam said, "not bounty hunters. We can protect you from Big Jake."

"No you can't."

"Yes we can," Sam said. "We can have you back in Las Palmas by tomorrow evening. Turn over the stones and maybe we can work something out."

"You're full of it. You want me to smoke Big Jake into the open."

"That's a pretty good idea," Sam said. "Glad you thought of it."

I could tell she wanted to jump up and smack

Sam a hundred ways to Sunday, but the guns kept her still. She had a good set of lungs, though, and she used them well.

"Why should I bother if you're just gonna toss me in a cell next to Jake? He can reach into the pen, too, you know. He's connected up the kazoo."

I said, "Kelly, if you know Big Jake is looking for you, why in the world are you parading around without even the simplest of disguises? How do you think we found you? You're trying to smoke him out yourself, that's why you were ready with the shotgun when we knocked."

"I didn't believe that car trouble story for a second, bub," she said to Sam.

"I didn't hear my buddy Jack coming up with any hot ideas," he said to me.

"You didn't ask," I said.

"Har har," Sam said.

Kelly told us the rubies were stashed somewhere in the hills behind the cabin; we told her we didn't want to know. They could be recovered later, and it cemented the idea in her mind, I think, that we were going to work with her. Sam even mentioned that Big Jake would be a bigger catch than her. I wanted to bring them both in. I could really use a cut of that reward money.

After letting her pack a bag and lock up the place, we hiked back to town. She stayed a few feet ahead of us, and we watched her hands to make sure she didn't dip into her bag for any surprises. We'd watched her pack, but knew better than to assume she wouldn't try to get away.

Our plan was to go back to the hotel, pack our own gear, and hit the road as soon as possible.

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I recognized the two palookas right away – Dave Warner and Ray Newton, the guys who'd jumped Sam and I outside the hash house. The ones we'd taken the guns from. Their faces were bruised and cut up, and they looked plenty mad, but the third man in our hotel room kept them under control.

He wasn't called Big Jake for nothing. At least 280 pounds, six feet, a cue ball head; his black eyes bored into us as he rose from the chair by the window and cracked a slow smile.

"Thanks for doing the hard work for me, boys," he said, his eyes on Kelly. She shrank back toward Sam and I. The palookas raised their guns – new ones – and Big Jake told us to drop

ours.

The weapons thudded on the floor.

Big Jake approached us, stopping in front of Kelly, taking her chin in the big fingers of his right hand. "You're looking well, Kelly. Still a hot tomato. Why'd you have to blast me like that, after all we meant to each other?"

"I meant more to myself," she said, trying to pull away. He grabbed her with both hands this time, flung her toward the bed. His boys covered us while he snatched up the guns. Holding the .45 on us, he told us to get over by the beds. The palookas moved behind him toward the door.

Big Jake said, "Your buddy Dick Lewis at the FBI talks too much. He blabbed to somebody who blabbed to my source that you two had a lead on Kelly, so thanks for your efficiency."

"That sounds like Dick," Sam said.

Big Jake laughed, and then the .45 jumped in his big grip. The thundering roar of the blast bounced off the walls and Sam crashed into me, his hot blood splashing onto me; I tried to lunge Jake, but he fired again and I felt the blow right in my gut. I hit the floor hard. Kelly started screaming; somebody slapped her. I heard the pounding of their feet as the bad guys hustled out, the door slamming. Fire spread through my body, especially the middle; I couldn't breath, but I didn't lose consciousness.

Sucking air in short breaths, I dragged myself away from Sam and rolled onto my back. My body didn't like that and I winced, pushing the pain away. I looked down at my middle and almost laughed. My Big Texas belt buckle had been split in half, but it had apparently deflected Jake's bullet. Some blood had soaked the front of my shirt and pants, but I didn't feel any holes there.

Sam wasn't so lucky. Totally out, bleeding heavily. Before I could pick up the phone, somebody was pounding on the door and I shouted for them to come in. The door crashed open and two hotel clerks stopped at the sight of us, and I shouted for them to get the sheriff and a doctor up here right away.

The doctor made it within a few minutes; I'd gotten Sam on his back, was stopping the flow of blood with towels. The doc had two assistants with him who carried a stretcher; he checked Sam out, spoke in some sort of shorthand to his assistants, helped them get Sam on the stretcher and carried him out. The sheriff wanted to talk to me, and through clenched teeth I told him most of the story. He said he'd get a posse together and go after Big Jake.

Where did I think they went? I said I didn't know, but I thought they said they were going south, into the hills. He told me to get myself to the hospital and he and his boys would take care of it, they were good ol' boys, and I said okay.

He left, and I sat by the window still trying to get my breath back, looking at the shattered pieces of my Big Texas belt buckle, still attached to my belt. I couldn't help but grin. I wouldn't say anything bad about Texas ever again.

But I had to move fast. Kelly's cabin was north of town; what lay in the south I had no idea. But I wasn't going to let that country bumpkin of a sheriff take the credit for the kill.

Easier said than done. I couldn't move very fast, and had to take it easy. But at least I knew the way. I felt stupid charging after Big Jake, his palookas, and Kelly without a weapon of any kind, but I've been stupid before. I reached the trees on the edge of the cabin about forty minutes later, staying near the tree Sam and I had hid behind earlier. Nobody in sight, no sounds from the cabin. For all I knew, Big Jake had grabbed the rubies, shot Kelly, and was long gone.

I found a thick, hooked branch that would make a good blunt instrument, but hardly anything to match the guns I'd face. I left it on the ground. I hustled toward the front door, dropped down on the porch. No voices through the cracks on the edges of the windows. A breeze rustled the trees, but carried no voices from afar with it.

I pushed open the front door, low-crawling along the floor. Couches, tables, a small kitchen inside. A hallway off the side of the kitchen. Still no voices. I was alone. Then I remembered Kelly saying the rubies were hidden in the hills. Maybe they'd gone for them. If that was the case, Big Jake would just shoot Kelly and leave her there, bypassing the house on the way back to town. And I had no idea where they'd gone. Sam and I had been stupid enough not to ask her because we wanted her trust; like I said, I've been stupid before.

I thought of Sam. Was he okay? The wound looked pretty bad, but a .45 bullet is a big slug and would make even a minor wound look bad. Jake hadn't been such a good shot where I was concerned, maybe -

I couldn't think about that now. I heard voices coming from the side of the house, Big Jake saying something, Kelly saying, "Ouch!", the palookas laughing.

I crawled down the hallway as the voices grew in volume. Maybe Kelly had more than a shotgun hidden in her bedroom. They hadn't left it where Sam had tossed it earlier. I looked under the bed, through the dresser drawers; finally, I found a short-nosed Colt revolver under the cushion of a rocking chair.

But my luck ran out as soon as I opened the revolver's cylinder. The gun was empty.

A door crashed open, and suddenly Big Jake's voice was loud and clear as he began ordering Kelly to whip up some grub for him and the boys, while they looked at the booty. She argued that she didn't have anything in the cabin, went to town for meals; the sharp sound of a slap reached my ears, her yelp made me cringe.

I felt under the mattress of her bed, under the pillows, checked in the nightstand. No bullets for the gun. Great. I had to face down three armed men with an empty gun. I could probably count on Kelly to jump in and help, but would she turn on me after?

Only one way to find out.

The kitchen was off to the left of the front of the hallway. I could hear Kelly rummaging through cabinets, pots clanking on a stove. Big Jake and his palookas laughed it up, saying things like look at the size of this one, or, hey, look at the sparkle on that one. I emerged from the hallway with the empty Colt outstretched and said, "Get away from the table!"

They jumped up and spun around to face me, Big Jake reaching for his .45, but getting a nice look at the muzzle of my empty revolver. He couldn't see that it was empty from where he was, and I was glad. He and his palookas inched their hands up, Big Jake laughing, and -

Kelly drew another shotgun from under the counter and racked the slide. Big Jake and the palookas snapped their attention to her, wide eyed, and she sent them into eternity with a rapid trio of blasts that knocked them down like bowling pins.

The echo of the blasts hadn't even died away when Kelly turned to face me, racked the shotgun again, and lined me up in her sights. She wasn't sweating or breathing hard at all.

"I know that gun isn't loaded," she said.

So I dropped it.

Sam had been transferred from the small

Haviland hospital to the neighboring city of Torrence, which had much better medical facilities. I found him there a day later, propped up in bed, bandaged, bruised, but alive. His wife, Trudy, sat beside the bed, putting down her magazine as I entered the room.

Sam cracked a smile, Trudy gave me a hug. I winced a little when she did that, my own body still recovering from what was supposed to have been a relaxing fishing trip.

"Doc says I'll be okay," Sam said.

"The one in Haviland told me. You were two hours on the operating table, though."

"Forget that. What happened?"

I tried to take a deep breath, but the huge bruise that had developed after Big Jake's bullet split my belt buckle in two flared up, and I cut it short. I said, "We recovered the rubies. And we'll get something for Big Jake and his goons, even though they're not with us anymore."

Sam raised an eyebrow, and I told him the story. He had to cut his laughter off when he heard about my belt buckle saving my life, but said we ought to get a matching pair and wear them all the time.

"What about Kelly?" he finally said.

"Took off," I said, watching his shoulders sink. "What can I say?"

"That's the last time I go fishing with you, Jack," he said.

But I knew he didn't mean it. ☹

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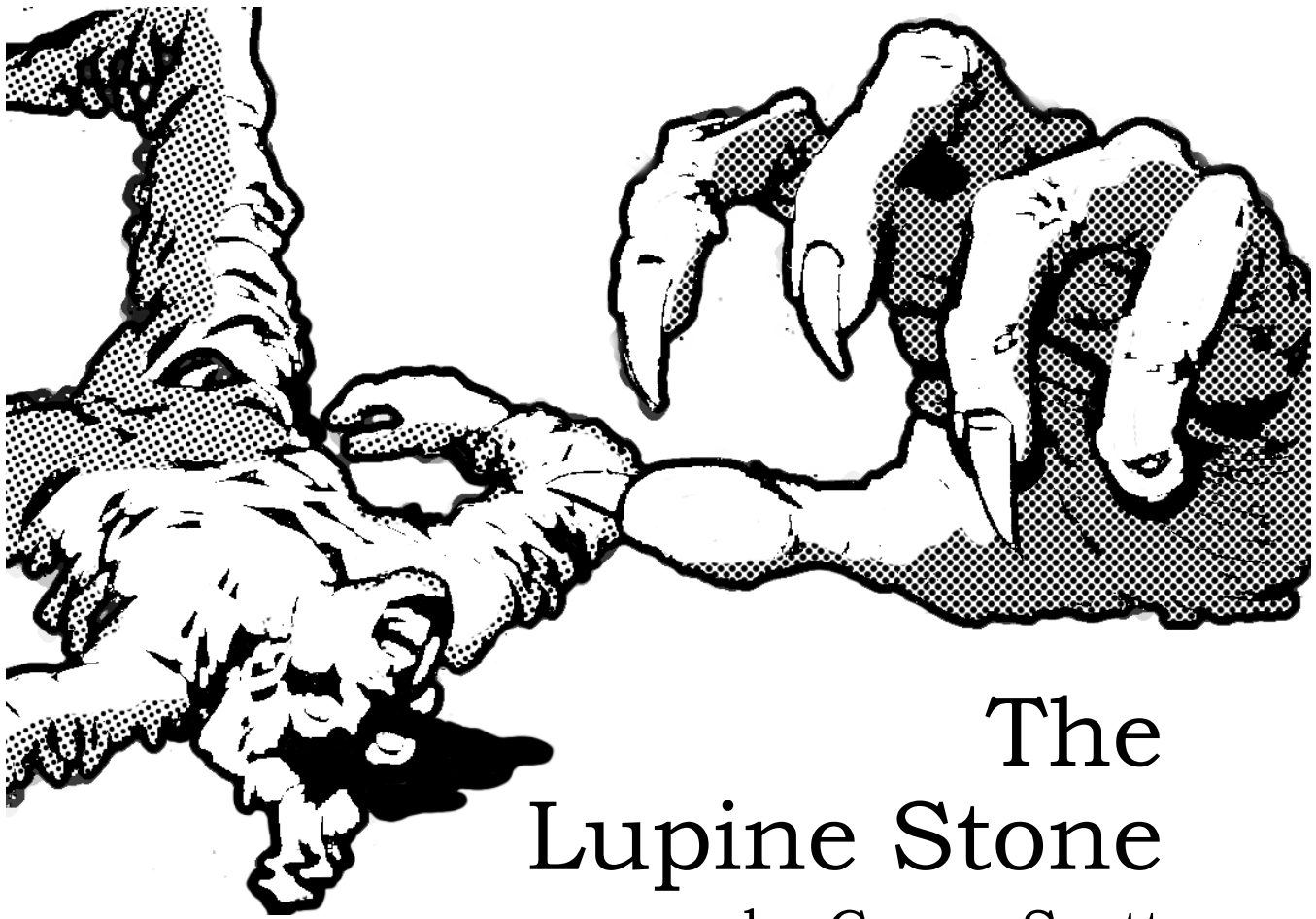


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The Lupine Stone

by Cavan Scott

A big city reporter moves to a small town to get away from it all. Too bad "it" decided to do the same thing.

MAY 12TH, 1933

Some things you just can't forget.

I suppose those who've read too many bad 10 cent stories expect all journos to be hard-bitten, cynical hacks, only happy when they've nailed the story and can crack open yet another bottle of giggle juice to dull the pain of all the human agony they've witnessed. Well, not this hack. This hack may err on the cynical side but isn't used to seeing the kind of butchery that I witnessed today. And ok, yeah, so I did nibble a few at Al's after work, but can you blame me?

It seemed like it would be yet another normal day when I dragged myself from bed this morning. Just another forgettable, mindless trudge through the routine of life. That's what happens when you're a reporter for the Bathampton Echo, a local paper reporting local events for local people. If the phrase 'nothing ever hap-

pens here' had been invented for one specific place, then that place was Bathampton, the quintessential small, sleepy American neighborhood. I'll give you an example. A couple of years ago the library reported that over a period of three months, they had four books snatched. I remember Miss Batt, the librarian with a face like a pterodactyl was furious as one of the books stolen - a collection of religious cross-stitch patterns - was her personal favorite. She'd been stitching her way through it for months and now, apparently, would never be able to finish the icon of the transfiguration now. A great loss to the art word, I'm sure. Anyway, this attack of the serial book-swiper was the biggest story to hit Bathampton in years. Even when Officer Wright told me this was the great Bathampton's crime wave with a wink, I knew the gag was half true. This was about as seedy as the vice free town ever got and the next day I would be back to reporting

on the Padre's new scheme to re-roof the church or Old Ma Beckerhill's record-breaking 20 foot long crocheted book-mark. Up state the hacks that reported the grime and corruption on Gotham's streets would have laughed through their cigarette smoke at me, but I don't care. I got out of that scene, years ago. And for good reason too. But that's another story. Let's just say that if Bathampton got any more laid back, the entire populace would be in a coma.

Heaven knows why I'm telling you all this. Probably because I think I need to put today's events in some kind of context just in case, one day, this journal ends up in the public domain. Hell, I haven't even kept a diary before, but today it seems... well, necessary somehow.

As I said, today seemed normal enough. I dragged myself out of bed, dragged my sleepy body to the mirror and then dragged a comb through my unruly mop of hair. Not that it made any difference as it stubbornly refused to submit to any kind of style. A cup of strong java and a stack of wheat later and I was on my way to work, basking in the sunshine of my ten minute walk to the office and aware of the fact that, hey, Bathampton isn't such a bad place to be. After all, there's no gridlocks, no pollution and it also contains Julie Bentley, the broad from the drugstore who smiles politely at me every morning when we pass in the street. I'm sure she's in besotted with me and can't pluck up the courage to actually say hi when I catch her eye down at Al's. Yeah, that must be it.

Old Warwick, the Echo's redoubtable editor, was in a foul mood when I breezed into the office to get today's assignments. Usually I can expect two grunts when I offer to make him a cup of Joe but not today. The schmuck didn't even look up as he threw a folder with some notes across his scarred, mahogany desk. Dick, our editorial admin-cum-general-gopher, reckons Warwick likes to pretend he's some spymaster, sending out his agents to death defying, globetrotting misadventures full of fantastical gadgets and easy, exotic dames. The most exotic we get in reality, however, is the odd tip-off that the local deli is trying out some weird and wonderful sandwich combo. The latest one was gherkins and cranberry if I remember rightly. You will not be surprised to hear, it didn't exactly take off.

I picked up the folder and peered inside to the few scrappy notes that made up my assignment.

"Go and see Dr Jane Walton. The address is in the file." Warwick snapped, not drawing his gaze away from the papers he was poring over.

"She claims she has some kind of haunted trinket or something. Could make an interesting, quirky piece. 250 words by half two this afternoon. OK?"

I wasn't expected to answer.

A quarter of an hour or so later I found myself knocking on the door of a fancy joint up on the west side. I'd flicked through the file on the way over. Nine-year-old Brad Jones had found a strange carving about the size of a grapefruit down by the river and had taken it home to his mom. It wasn't clear but it appeared to be some kind of skull. According to the file, the young family had soon started reporting that they'd seen ghostly apparitions around the house, knocking stuff over or terrorizing the cat. Dr Walton, a lecturer of history at the University of Blüdhaven and Bathampton's resident expert had taken the relic, or whatever it was, and promised to look into it. Apparently, she too was convinced that it was haunted and wanted to give her story to us. Bathampton is full of this kind of crap. Weirdoes and psychics. Can't stand them myself, but they do spice up a paper that gets its pant in a twist about a new 'guess the weight of the cake' competition at the annual fair.

I rapped on the door. The sooner I did this, the sooner I could get home, knock out 250 words of rubbish and head down to Al's to shoot some pool. There was no answer. Annoyed I looked at my watch. Before I'd left the office, I'd given Walton a call to make sure she was in. Another try with the doorknocker. Nothing. Try and ring the ancient door pull? No chance, rusted solid. Almost as an afterthought I tried the door handle and didn't expect it to open when it did. But why not? As I've said, this place isn't exactly the mean streets.

"Anyone home?" I called, as gingerly I stepped over the threshold. "Dr Walton?" Still no reply. The lobby was exactly how I'd imagined, all green flowery prints and nice oils of local sights. A dry flower arrangement stood under a mirror and a clock ticked in the corner. I called out another couple of times, but still there came no answer. This was damn odd. No one, not even in Bathampton, leaves their door open when they go out. I began to do what is known in the trade as snooping. No one in the lounge. No one in the kitchen. What about the back room? Looking back now, I wished I'd left as soon as I thought the place was empty. Then, maybe, I wouldn't see what awaited me every time I close my eyes.

Calling out again - quieter this time 'cos I was feeling kind of ridiculous yelling out in an obvi-

ously empty building - I opened the door to the back room. The place looked like a hurricane had hit it. A freestanding lamp was toppled over and everywhere you looked there were fragments of the doc's belongings, glass from smashed picture frames or feathers from the shredded cushions. At the far end sat a heavy table, turned on its side and scored with... what was that? Claw marks?

It was only then I saw a foot sticking out from behind the desk. I moved like lightening, only freezing once I had cleared the table. Lying across the floor was Dr Walton, staring up at me with wide, lifeless eyes. Not that I looked at her eyes for long as I couldn't help but stare at her neck and chest, scarlet and slick against the bleached white of her skin. Her body had been literally ripped open, guts and gore soaking into the carpet beneath. And in her hand, gripped in terror, sat a stone skull, grinning evilly up at me.

Even now, I would witness in court that as I stood there, trying hard to hold on to the contents of my own stomach, the damned thing winked at me.

MAY 13TH, 1933

What a day. The cops, ghouls wanting to see the stiff and, worst of all, the national press have swamped Bathampton. I finally got away from the station at 3pm yesterday after Officer Wright had taken my statement. I must admit that I'm still shaken by all this 24 hours later. Well, it's hardly surprising is it? It's not every day that you see a body with its insides ripped out.

I still can't believe I managed to write the story for the Echo. Perhaps I was still in shock. Perhaps I just work better under pressure. Who knows? But there it was for all to see in this morning's edition, my biggest byline ever, complete with a mug shot. Fame at last. Pop would've been so proud:

"LOCAL HISTORIAN BRUTALLY MURDERED"

An eyewitness report from Patrick Spencer
Old Warwick had said it was the best thing I had ever written, and it hadn't been long before the nationals had started to ring my desk. Before I'd left to wander down to Al's for a drink I'd received calls from *The New York Times*, *The*

Planet and *The Daily Bugle*. If only they'd been job offers eh? Nah, who am I kidding? I grew up on the wrong side of the track. That's why I'd fallen in with Fallon's mob and ended up having to turn up my heels and run from the big city. They hadn't found me yet, and I guess they'd given up the hunt. No matter how much I moaned about this town, I liked it here, I was safe and felt at home. There was no way I'd go back.

I'd excused myself and headed off for the gin palace. The jungle-drums had already started beating and as I walked along I could see curtains twitching and old-folk whispering as they watched me pass. It was almost as if I'd been the maniac who'd popped the doc.

I had Al's in my sights when a Gink in a long, brown flogger and hat worn low barged into me. The guy didn't even stop to apologize. Brushing myself down I yelled after him to get some manners. His shoes scraped against the sidewalk as he suddenly came to a halt, as if he'd only noticed me for the first time. Sniffing, he turned where he was standing and fixed me with an icy stare. My kisser bobbed open and shut like some lunatic goldfish but for a second I just couldn't speak. What was this big lug? He must have stood some six feet in his socks and was built like a prizefighter. His face was lined and severe, surrounding two piercing blue eyes glaring out from hooded lids. But most shocking of all, it looked as if someone had taken a cleaver to his mug. One single ancient scar scored across his features, starting just beneath his left eye and slashing down, across his misshapen schnozzle to finish on his right cheek.

For a moment he just stood there, motionless, with his hands thrust into his deep pockets. Suddenly I remembered how to speak.

"H-hey Joe, you should look where you're walking. You could hurt someone."

The stranger made no reply other than tilting his head to one side, like he was sizing me up. Then, as if making a decision, he opened his thin, cruel lips.

"You Patrick Spencer?"

"Err, yeah, yeah I am. How d'you know that?"

"You planning to leave town over the next few days?"

"N-no. I've got no where to go." This was getting kinda creepy. "What's it to you anyway? You from out of town? Something to do with..."

But I was wasting my breath. Briefly giving me the old up-and-down one more time, the guy turned and carrying on his way, disappearing into the gloom. What the hell had that been

about? And had no one told him that smoking that many cigarettes was bad for his health? His voice sounded like he scraped razor blades over his vocal cords every night. A cold sweat suddenly hit me like a clammy sledgehammer. I'd thought about Fallon for the first time in years earlier today. What if he hadn't decided to forgive and forget? What if he'd sent this goon down here to find me, maybe even to rub me out? Breathing hard, I ran my hand down my face, trying to calm myself. It was no good, I needed a drink more than ever.

If Warwick had been in anyway human he might have given me today off, but oh no, not him. Instead I was given the task of visiting the Joneses, the family that had found the skull-thing in the first place. The cops had no news as yet and so Warwick was trying to stretch out the story and the artifact, whatever it was, seemed a nice macabre twist. The family had refused to jaw to the national press, but Warwick knew Fiona Jones' father so managed to swing the interview.

"My son came home one night after he'd been playing with Lucy, his sister, as excited as I'd ever seen him." Mrs Jones explained. "They'd been playing at the riverside and found some kind of hole."

Fiona Jones was what I always called a 'yummy mummy', a skirt who even though was pushing way into her forties had kept her figure and could still turn a man's head. Unfortunately, this hadn't stopped Jim, her husband, running off with the 19-year-old daughter of the butcher. Now, she looked after her two kids by herself. The official story was that Jim was a stiff, but the gossipmongers of the town knew better.

"And it's there he found the stone?" I asked, keen to push the story on.

"Yes." She nodded, taking a sip of her tea. "I didn't like it at first. Horrible looking thing. Like some kind of skull."

I shivered as she described it. She wasn't wrong; the damned rock was one of the spookiest things I'd ever seen. Then again, it had been gripped in the hand of the recently butchered Dr Walton. I guess anything would look spooky in those circumstances.

"And how long was it before you started noticing..." I struggled for the right word, "...strange phenomenon?"

Mrs Jones looked nervously upstairs where she had left her children. Apparently they were still disturbed by recent events and she didn't

want them to relive anything if it wasn't completely necessary.

"Almost immediately," she half whispered. "At first I thought it was Brad's imagination – he's always in a world of his own that one. He kept telling me he was being followed around the house by a wolf-man. I told him not to be so silly and then Lucy started joining in."

"Has Lucy a wild imagination too?" I asked. Mrs Jones shook her head.

"Not at all. Quite the opposite. And then, well, it sounds silly, but I started seeing things."

It was obvious that Fiona was struggling with this, finding it embarrassing. "What kind of things, Mrs Jones."

"Out of the corner of my eye you know. Like when you think you've seen someone and there's no one there when you look. But there was something there. I could see a definite shape. Tall, unusually tall in fact and standing like a man."

"What kind of man?" I asked.

"That's just it," came the reply, "I'm not sure it was a man. It looked more like a wolf, covered in shaggy blue hair. With a snout-like face and burning eyes."

I obviously hadn't kept the incredulous expression from my face.

"I'm not one for whimsy, Mr Spencer. These things were everywhere in the house, just out of sight. Following us, as if they were keeping an eye on us, seeing what we were up to."

"I'm not saying I don't believe you, Mrs Jones." I said, trying to calm her again. Usually I would have written off a story like this to be the witterings of a kook, but today was different. It may have been the memory of Walton's dead eyes staring blankly at me but the world seemed to have jumped a groove. Perhaps I'd kept my mind locked up too long to the full possibilities of the world and while it was obvious that Mrs Jones' story was too fantastic to believe, it was clear that she believed it with all her heart. She sure looked happy to pause for a minute and take another sip of tea, as if gathering her thoughts. Licking my pencil, I continued with the interview. "So, tell me, these wolves, they just watched you? That's all?"

"At first, yes. But the children were getting so upset by it. They couldn't sleep. Brad said that the monsters, that's what he called them, sat at the bottom of his bed at night. Mr Spencer, I don't believe in ghosts but I can guarantee that something was here."

I told her that I didn't doubt her and asked what she had done next. Had she asked anyone for help? Staring into the fireplace she told

me that she approached Dr Walton when she saw her while out buying groceries one day. The doc had listened and then become animated when she heard about the wolves. She'd offered to come round that evening and pick it up.

"And so that's what she did? Was that the last time you saw the doctor?"

Mrs Jones nodded, fighting back tears. The entire experience had obviously upset her more than I first expected.

"I'll never forget that night. It was almost like they knew that skull was about to exchange hands. I sent the kids to bed early but the entire house was in an uproar. Doors that I knew were locked were banging open and shut and the windows were rattling in their frames, almost as if they were going to shake free. Then as the door bell sounded there was this almighty crash from the kitchen where I had locked the thing."

She fell silent staring into the fire once more.

"Mrs Jones. What was it?" I prompted. "What was the noise?"

Shaking slightly, Fiona Jones looked up at me and explained that she'd rather I saw it for myself. Slowly she led me into the kitchen and reached up to a dustsheet that was covering a tall piece of furniture. With a sharp tug she let it fall to the grown, to reveal a wooden dresser, its door ripped in two.

"This is how I found it, just before I heard an unearthly howl echoing around the house. It was the most terrifying thing I'd ever experienced.

Despite myself the hairs on the back of my neck sprang to attention. The claw marks dug deep into the wood were the same as those on Dr. Walton's desk.

I couldn't get out of that place quick enough. Half an hour later I leaning on Al's bar and knocking back a stiff hooker of whisky. God, I've been drinking a lot these last few days. But I wasn't the only one. I admit I was feeling a little guilty, throwing the old Eel Juice down my neck in the middle of the afternoon, but at least I wasn't out on the roof while on duty. Yeah, yeah, I had a story to write but my playing hooky didn't seem so bad when I saw who was skulking in the shadows, clutching a recently drained glass.

Officer Wright didn't even look up at me at first when I sloped over to the table, but when he did, I couldn't help but be shocked. Wright was a man nearing the end of his career, up-standing and loyal and most noticeably a man

who liked his food. Thank god he didn't usually have to chase crooks along the streets of Bathampton. His poor old heart would never cope. Yet here he was, his usually rosy, chubby cheeks pasty and white, and his steady hands shaking around the glass he grasped in his hand as if his life depended on it.

When he finally acknowledged my presence, his eyes were bloodshot and small, dark circles hanging beneath his frightened gaze.

"Is everything ok, Officer Wright?" I enquired.

At first he didn't seem to recognize me but soon pulled himself back to his senses.

"Y-yeah, I'm fine, thank you Patrick." He stammered in reply. Just had a bad day that's all. Needed a little pick me up."

His bloodshot eyes darting back to his glass.

"It's just this business what that thing," he continued to no-one in particular, "that stone. In all my years, I've never seen... never felt..."

He trailed off. I offered him another drink. This could be an interesting angle for my story, and besides this entire affair was pulling me in more and more. I needed to know what the grift was with that damn lump of rock. Perhaps Wright would let me see it.

"No. No!" The violence of his response shook me. "Out of the question. It's safe now and needs to stay that way. At the station, yes, at the station."

Suddenly he made a grab for his cap. "... which is where I should be. Can't sit around here chinning all day. Now if you'd excuse me..."

And with that, he was off, shoving past me without even a goodbye. Perhaps it was the bizarre nature of this story, or my own reaction to the skull, but I made up my mind to follow him to find out more. Hell, at least I'd feel like a proper newshawk for once. But, my gumshoeing didn't last long. As I barrelled out of Al's I noticed Wright talking to a man over the street. My blood ran cold when I saw it was the gee I'd bumped into last night. He was towering over Wright, the scar lurid against his grey face. As I watched the big guy pulled out a stuffed envelope and tried to thrust it into Wright's shaking hands. Was Wright on the take? No, I'd never believe that. And I'd be right, as the next second the cop pushed the envelope away, shaking his head furiously. The heavy didn't like that one little bit and loomed over Wright's ever shrinking form. I felt my guts tighten as anger welled up inside me. I couldn't just stand by and let Wright be muscled like this. Stepping forward to cross the road, I froze in my stride as the large man suddenly turned to face me. I must have stared too long because those

hooded eyes darted up and locked on to me like a hawk spots its prey. For a section I forgot how to breathe. And then, before I could act, the unlikely duo was blocked out of sight by a passing truck. Cursing, I willed the driver to skedaddle, but when he'd finally passed both Wright and the stranger were gone.

MAY 14TH, 1933

If I'd known how last night was going to turn out I would have never had got up out of bed in the morning. Try as I might I just couldn't shake the memory of my strange meeting with Officer Wright and the sight of him being menaced by that scarred gorilla. I attempted to rest but sleep wouldn't find me. I still don't know why but I suddenly realized that to put this out of my mind, I'd have to go down to the clubhouse and have it out with Wright. The usually cordial officer obviously knew exactly was going on here.

And so, not even twenty minutes later I found myself walking down the alley that led to the police station. I grant you, it was only as this point that I wondered exactly what I was going to say. Should I demand to see the stone? Would that just put Wright's back up? If it did that could be the end of the lay. Perhaps I should apologize for earlier. I'd done nothing wrong but I could at least pretend that I thought I'd upset the bum. Yeah, that'll work. Appeal to his humor and charm my way into the evidence room.

I turned the corner, pulling my coat tight around me in the cold evening air, when I heard it for the first time. A flock of pigeons shot into the air as above the low rumble of traffic and the sounds of the city, an uncanny howl burst from nowhere. My guts turned to an iceberg deep within me as the mournful cry died, its last echoes reverberating along the garbage filled alley. I quickened my pace and soon found myself outside the station. The front door was yawning open, nearly wrenched from its hinges. I should have been scared but it was too late for that. I needed to know what was going on. Ignoring the deep, beastly growl that rumbled from within the station I cautiously entered the shattered doorway.

All was silent. I wanted to call out but didn't think it would be too clever to alert anyone to the fact that I was here. For the first time in my

thirty years I wished that I were heeled. It was as silent as the grave and my every step seemed to shout out in the eerie silence, telegraphing my presence to whatever horror lurked within these corridors. Peering around the corridor I placed my hand on the wall to steady myself only to feel something crawl over its back. Crying out, I whipped my hand away and watched in revulsion as the fat spider spun through the air, before hitting the floor and scuttling into the shadows. Jeez, I was too jumpy for my own good.

Turning the corner I noticed a light ahead of me. Guessing that was Wright's office I inched nearer, straining to hear anything at all. It was then I noticed the glass was shattered and the lock of the door looked like it had been ripped clean off. My heart missed a beat when I made out the long scratches clawed into the woodwork. With no thought of whatever hell I was walking into I yanked open the door.

Officer Wright was gagging on the floor. He chest was a bloody mess, five deep gashes torn across his flabby skin and his right leg definitely not at a natural angle. It looked as if he'd been tossed around the room - which itself was almost totally demolished - like some kid's rag doll. I knelt beside the fallen cop and looked around for something I could use to staunch the flow of blood from his chest. I'm no doctor but those wounds looked bad. It was probably too late but I could at least try.

Wright was continuing to choke on the stream of mucus and blood that was flowing from his mouth. Desperately, I tried to sit him up, but it was no good. As soon as I moved him the poor sap screamed out in agony. It was hopeless.

Through his hysteria and pain, Wright looked up at me, eyes which had been spinning in their sockets finally fixing on my pan. His hand shot up and grabbed my head pulling me down towards him. I was so near I could smell the liquor on his breath and the blood on his chest. Still coughing his lungs up, the dying goose managed to hiss one word - "... Slade..." - before his head lolled to the side. As he breathed his last I saw his eyes widen as he took something in behind me. I turned to the direction his dead eyes were pointing and jumped to see a massive figure standing in the doorway to the evidence room. Hooded blue eyes glared down at me and a massive chest rose and fell as he breathed heavily. As I stared transfixed, the stranger wiped the sweat from his face, leaving a crimson smear across his scar. His hands were slick with blood - the blood of the fallen police officer who had just died in my arms.

And in his other paw, he clutched the stone like a trophy.

In a second it all clicked. This must be the Slade of Wright's final words and the man responsible for his death, and that of Dr Walton. He'd obviously been after the stone all along, although why he had to scare the Jones family out of their wits I'd never know. And what about the wolf sightings and the claw marks? They didn't make sense unless he was a... no, pull yourself together Patrick. Werewolves don't exist.

I didn't know what to do but I didn't have to wait long before a decision was made for me. Like a shot, Slade made for the door, but I was quicker than he obviously thought and dived for his getaway sticks, bringing him down. We tumbled over the spilt papers and pens on the floor, as I tried to pin him down. Then, before I could stop him, the larger man twisted his body around and slugged me slap bang on the temple with the skull. As I hit the floor, the metallic taste of blood filled my mouth and, stunned, I glanced up to see Slade sweep from the room. At first I couldn't stand, but steadying myself on the desk edge I waited for the room to stop spinning. As soon as I could I made after Slade, sweeping up Officer Wright's car keys as an afterthought.

By the time I'd got down to the alley, Slade was nowhere to be seen. The cold night air stung my aching lungs and my forehead throbbed uncontrollably. I'd lost it. Slade was gone and so was the stone.

Then, like a bat out hell, a massive black Flivver swerved around the corner and down the alley. At the last minute I flung myself into a pile of garbage to avoid being a new hood ornament but still managed to take in who was behind the wheel. Slade.

Thanking the late Officer Wright for leaving his keys where it was handy for me to swipe them I made for his heap. The engine turned over at the first attempt and I was off, slamming my foot on the gas and driving as if I had the devil at my heels. Turning the corner of Franks Street I saw the Flivver charging towards the river. What was the guy up to? Why go back to where the kid found the skull in the first place. Ahead of us the lights turned red but I wasn't surprised to see that Slade didn't make any attempt to slow down. Instead, the jerk took the iron up a gear and screamed ahead. I wasn't about to let him go. The pedal hit the metal and I rocketed towards the lights. Just my luck,

an old gran'ma chose just that moment to step off the sidewalk. I swerved, nearly wrapped myself around a fire hydrant and sped on, checking in the rear-view mirror to see if the old dame was ok. I was greeted by the kind of gesture that a woman of that age just shouldn't know.

Slade was nowhere to be seen, but that wasn't a problem. The guy was from out of town whereas I had grown up in Bathampton and learnt to drive on these roads. Just because I didn't own a motor, didn't mean I hadn't picked up a few short cuts in my time. I cornered on the edge of Wordley and Saunders, nearly rolling the damn thing, before taking an immediate right onto Parfitt. Yeah, there was the river, but where was Slade.

Tired squealing, the Flivver shot from the main street and powered towards the mooring spot. The speed must have gone to my head, because suddenly I had the craziest notion that would ever explode over my synapses. Bracing myself, I floored the gas and shot forward like a bullet. Slade wouldn't even have seen me coming. I don't think I will ever forget the sickening crunch as the two boilers barrelled into each other, the hood of my car concertina-ing as it hit the side of the Ford. We skidded for what seemed an eternity until CRASH! I watched Slade's car plough into the riverside wall. A wave of flame shot into the air as the driver's door opened and the guy leapt from the smoking wreck, rolling as the fire found the gas tank. The night sky was illuminated for a second by the inferno ballooning into the cold air.

Panting, I peered through the smoke, but couldn't see any movement. Had he survived? God, I hope I hadn't just popped a guy. What had I been thinking?

I never saw the punch coming through the open window beside me, never heard the door being pulled open and the grunt as Slade yanked me from the car. But I sure felt the tarmac as he threw me to the floor, finishing the job with a crippling kick to the solar plexus. For the second time that day, I sucked in blood.

"What are you, kid? Nuts?"

I looked up to find myself facing the business end of a .45.

"Am I nuts? Hey, I'm not the guy making like the big bad woof and gutting innocent bystanders, you freak."

"You seriously think that I did that?"

"Well, lets see. Massive mentalist runs around town giving folk the heebie-jeebies before slashing up doctors and cops, all for some stupid carving. Caught with blood on his hands and

murder on his mind. Yeah, pal, looks like it you alright."

"I knew you were some kind of writer but I didn't know you had that much imagination. Sorry to disappoint you but I haven't zotzed anyone... yet."

The threat in the growl of a voice was unmistakable, but something inside of me kinda snapped, you know, like I couldn't take this no more. I was fed up of being pushed around. Hell, that's why I'd left the city in the first place, tired of getting pushed around, by my family, my gal, by Fallon. It all changed the day I told the big galoot that I wasn't gonna take his money to write the stories he needed to get his enemies put away, or at least kicked off by a rival mob. I'd chosen to scam then, well Fallon had said he'd rip my spine out through my mouth, but I was through running. No-one was gonna push me round again.

I kicked out, swinging my leg so I took out Slade's ankles. He went down hard, the piece spinning out of his hand. I couldn't let him take control again, so I drew back my leg and slammed my sole in face. While he was dazed, I scrambled to my feet, grabbing his shooter as I rose, and stood over him, arm outstretched. Now, we'd see how he liked having a bean shooter shoved in *his* mush.

"Right, I think its time you let it slip, wise guy. If it wasn't you who's been doing it doggie style?"

Slade dabbed at his bloody nose, examining his slick, red-tipped fingers."

"Nice kick kid. I'm impressed."

"Don't patronize me." I yelled, trying to keep the quiver out of my voice. "Start talking or I start squirting lead."

Slade replied by throwing back his head and letting out a mighty belly laugh.

"You'll do what? Heh, you think I'm starting to like you. I thought you were some kind of nance after looking at your file, but you're OK."

"File? What file?"

"Patrick Spencer. Patsy for crime lord Charlie Fallon, back up in Gotham. What they call a parrot in the trade, a hack who's on the take, writing whatever his boss tells him to. Only you didn't, did you Patrick. When it all got too much you tried to be a man and Fallon slapped you down, so you tucked tail and ran."

I tightening my finger on the trigger in anger. How did he know all this?

"Don't worry Patrick, the creeps I work for can get anyone's file. All I have to do is ask. But I'm not after you. You're a little too ordinary for my line of work."

I'd had enough of this.

"What's this all about?" I yelled, my voice echoing around the riverside. To make my point I rammed the gun nearer Slade's face. He started singing.

"About two thousand years ago a pagan warlord by the name of Greyhammer ruled the land of Cornwell in England. When he died, as was his religion, his body was cremated and the ashes sealed in this," Slade pulled the skull from his pocket, "The Lupine Stone. His sorcerer wove a curse. If anyone attempted to remove the stone from the palace spirits from the shadow-world would attack, ready to protect their long-dead king."

"And these spirits just happen to be what, homicidal werewolves?"

"Got it one, kid. Unfortunately, the stone eventually found itself on the Mayflower as it sailed packed with pilgrims and over time has traveled the country, leaving a trail of blood in its path. Somehow it washed up here, literally. As soon as it received a human touch the spirits were summoned and by the looks of it are getting stronger by the second."

I hated to admit it but something in the back of my mind thought that this all made sense. After all, the wolves, if that's what they really were, had only started by scaring. As time went by the deaths had started to mount up.

"And where do you fit in all this Slade?"

"I don't think now's the time Patrick."

"Well, I do" I shouted, "before someone else dies."

"If that's what you really think, boy, I suggest you look to see what's standing behind you."

Yeah, like I was going to fall for that one. But something in the way that Slade was staring past me towards to where my crate was... well, you couldn't exactly call it parked, made me think again. Slowly, I turned, my feet slipping on the wet tarmac. Up to this point I'd never believed the old clichés but my heart didn't just leap to my mouth, it practically went into orbit.

"There's your killers, son. Now, I'd back away slowly if I were you."

No kidding, Sherlock. Perhaps it was time to change my view on werewolves. There in front of me stood three of the most hideous creatures I had ever seen. They swayed from foot to foot, their blood red eyes never leaving Slade. Blue, matted hair covered their sinewy bodies, and bright yellow saliva dripped from snarling maws. If that wasn't enough to have a grown man crying for his mommy, their gargantuan

arms ended in massive elongated hands each boasting ragged claws.

"They've come for the Lupine Stone." Slade announced, standing as still as a statue and covering the leader of the pack with his gat. "Give me my gun."

"What?"

"My gun, now," he snapped, snatching the .45 from my fist and raising the skull out into the air. At the sight of it all three monsters pricked up their ears and drew their lips further back over their enormous fangs. "There are your protectors, kid. That story good enough for you?"

Like I cared about the story. I was more worried about having my flesh ripped from my bones. One question still bugged my though. This wasn't the time or the place, but hey, I was about to get mauled anyway. I wouldn't be able to ask later.

"So, what have you got to do with this?"

Slade snorted, still covering the creatures that glared back at him. Any minute someone was going to break the staring competition and strike out. I had a sinking feeling I knew who it would be and who would be left howling after the fight had been lost.

"Never mind that, kid. Let's just say people in high places have wanted the Lupine Stone for a very long time so they can study it. In cases like this someone has to come and fetch." A smile played over his thin lips. "Every dog has his day, after all."

"What do we do now, peer each other to death?"

"No, I think I pump metal into one of these goons, right between the eyes and we see what happens."

"You're joking?" I spluttered, "You can't be serious."

The crack of the .45 told me he was. With a howl of pain, the wolf to my right grew a third eye and was propelled back by the shot. As it crashed to the ground, the leader of the pack threw back its head and bayed to the moon before snapping back to glare at us. This was it. I was about to bite the big one.

With a bloodcurdling roar the two remaining beasts leapt forward, claws stretched out to turn us into scarlet rags. Scrambling I grabbed a rotten plank of wood some bum had left on the side and swung it in front of me. It connected with the creature and the wolf screamed in pain, splinters slicing into its eyes. I turned to see the leader swipe at Slade who sailed through the air, before piling into some barrels. Smelling victory, the monster sprinted for-

ward before screeching to a halt as Slade flipped round, his arm outstretched. The Lupine Stone leered out of his fist. Under its gaze the monsters froze, unsure what to do next.

"Yeah, the highbinders want the stone," Slade hissed, "But I've seen the bloodshed. I wanted to get to Wright before it was too late, but they'd manifested before I'd even stepped over the threshold. This thing's far too dangerous so it's time to bite the bullet."

All this time, the wolves had been standing ready to spring, muscles taut and glistening with sweat. As almost in a trance they gaped as Slade tossed the skull into the air.

All hell broke loose. In a flash they were on us, the one I'd blinded clawing at my skin. It felt like red-hot coals tearing across my chest. Through the pain I could see the larger creature landing on Slade, paws raised high for the kill as the Stone arched through the air. Slade went down, but his gun hand swung up. Both monsters twisted to watch the stone, allowing me a chance to elbow mine in the face. It was like hitting concrete. With a yell of exertion and frustration, Slade pulled the trigger and found his shot. The shell hit the stone as gravity took hold and it began to tumble. In a split second the skull erupted into a fine dust that floated slowly back to earth. As it fell, the creatures howled, clutching their heads with their knife-like claws and then, as abruptly as they had appeared, their bodies exploding into green flame. Screaming until the last, the inhuman figures disintegrated in the flames, which burnt up into the air before dissipating.

The sudden silence was such a shock that I almost forgot about the searing pain in my chest until I felt two great hands pull me to my feet.

"That doesn't look too nasty," claimed Slade, "but we better get you to the hospital."

I tried to walk, but my legs buckled beneath me. Thankfully Slade was there to catch me.

"So, have they gone?" I asked, my head spinning, the shock beginning to hit. Slade nodded.

"No stone to protect equals no protectors."

"But weren't you supposed to take it back to your... superiors?"

Grabbing the keys to Wright's car, Slade manhandled me to the passenger seat.

"Sure I was. But accidents happen and strong decisions have to be made. If they don't like it they can sack me for all I care."

I gasped as he lowered me into the seat. The pain was really starting to kick in and it was all I could do to remain conscious as Slade jumped into the drivers' seat and fired the engine.

"There'll always be another case to pay the rent.
This way I think I've done everyone a favor."

As I let the darkness creep in at the edge of
my vision, I couldn't help but groan as I heard

Slade mutter to himself, with a crooked smile.
"It's always good to kill two dogs with one stone."

Who'd have thought the old mug would have
a sense of humor. ☺



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<http://www.freewebs.com/saucytales/>

Imagine our surprise when we opened our mailbox and found a delightful little puzzle had been submitted for issue three. And from a competitor no less! We at *Printed Poison* have all read *Saucy Tales of the Supernatural* so we know that Dr Macabre can put together a pretty good zine. Alright, granted, a *very* good zine. Some would even say a better zine than

ours. (Others wouldn't, if they know what's good for them.) And then this fine editor up and blesses us with such... generosity. Why, it makes us wonder... *What's your angle, Macabre??* I guess we have to thank you whatever it is. But I have to say that now I almost regret sending you those chocolates. (They were arsenic laced, of course.) – Eds.

Old Snakehips is Back

by TP Keating

Ivan and Jean are about to find out there's a snake loose in the garden of jazz!

"April North gave me an interesting tip," I mentioned to Jean, while we sat on my office sofa, listening to Count Bassie on the radio and waiting for a new client to keep this gumshoe in gumshoes.

"She gets her tips out far too freely, if you ask me," she shot back, playfully, while absent-mindedly twirling a strand of her long, auburn hair. "What did she say?"

"Snakehips Samuda is up to his old tricks. He broke surface in a clip joint near The Bowery. A few select customers each night are strong-armed for every red cent they have, roughed up if they threaten to complain, then dumped in an alley."

"New skin, same snake."

"A skin that's paid for by fleecing the punters," I observed. "So grab that flirty little hat of yours and we'll head for The Neon Dream, to rattle a dangerous snake."

"Flirty?"

"I meant... well, yeah, I did mean flirty."

"Good, because that's exactly why I bought it." Her blue eyes sparkled with amusement. We reached the front door. "Are you getting paid?"

"No. This one is for altruists everywhere, and my downstairs' neighbors' painful memory of Snakehips' fists."

Snakehips believed in leading from the front. As we took our seats at the rear of a dimly lit Neon Dream, he launched into a trumpet solo from the middle of the stage. His red, puffed out cheeks contrasted with his thickset features. His band, The Henchmen, did what they did best - followed their musical leader anywhere for a few quick bucks. He liked a beat harder than the one he used to punch a trussed



up punter, before robbing the unlucky boozehound. I placed my trilby on the table.

"Honeybaby," said Jean, leaning her lips close to my ear, "what say we push our single beds together some day soon?"

"Hey, we're supposed to wear the white hats, remember?"

"Can't they be flirty white hats as well?"

The drummer had gone beyond his liquor limit about an hour ago, the pianist lurked in shadow like a midnight mugger, and the guitarist looked capable of several crimes simultaneously. I always liked this band.

"Don't tell me you still enjoy that bunch of vermin, Ivan?"

"They play with soul."

"Yeah, all the souls they've stolen."

"Whatever."

"Don't whatever me."

"Ma'am, sir," said the waiter, "would you like to order? I can recommend the Beaujolais nouveau. It's so nouveau that the vineyard owner doesn't realize it's missing." We nodded, he poured two glasses and shimmied away, back into the cigar smoke that wafted between the art deco features and the plush red drapes along the walls.

The music slowed and quietened. Snakehips sang, "El burro. El burro loco. La beret. La beret a GoGo. Ola, roja. Ola, roja. El burro. El burro loco." With loud brays from the band, the song ended. Honestly, where was jazz going nowadays? The packed club applauded. "Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. We'll return for another set in 45 minutes." A hum of drinking and conversation filled the gap left by the music.

With a glance I caught the waiter's eye. "We're friends of Snakehips." No wonder the waiter appeared dubious, the words Snakehips and friends didn't belong in the same sentence. I pushed a couple of greenbacks into his palm. "Point him to this table and that won't be your only tip." With a curt nod he made for his quarry.

"Don't forget the rent is due on Friday," Jean reminded me.

"You've got to invest to earn a profit, and Snakehip's stock is on the rise."

"A clear case of insider trading."

"Good evening, Jean my darling," the jazzman soothed, collecting her hand to plant a gentle kiss. "Good evening, Mister Young. Any man who steps out with such a princess is to be admired for his taste and good fortune."

"Yeah, and we love you too," I replied. "Since you're here, we'd like to have a chat." He slithered into an empty chair. "For a clip joint, the decor's not too bad."

"I've always harbored a weakness for Art Deco, ever since... hey, this ain't no clip joint."

"Sure, if bourbon laced with knockout drops represents a balanced diet."

"We do a mean chamomile tea, Ivan. It'll work wonders for your latent negative attitude." We scowled at each other. Who'd won that particu-

lar exchange? I'd no idea.

"The point is, we'd like a cut of the action," Jean announced. A look of surprise threatened to colonize my face, but Jean's stiletto pressed down on my brogue restored the PI mask.

"You would?" Samuda seemed caught between disgust and laughter.

"It's why we're here," I bluffed. "With my knowledge of similar operations, I'll be able to deflect any official interest."

"I knew that you weren't exactly getting rich from your snooping, Ivan, but, yeah, I could see how an alliance would be to our mutual benefit. What changed your mind?"

"I did," said Jean.

"That's right. She reminded me that the rent is due on Friday."

"Much as I value your joint expertise, you'll

have to start in entry level jobs, otherwise my regular staff might get a little jealous, if not downright homicidal. Play your cards right Jean, and you could end up in charge of the cigarette girls before too long."

I coughed and she managed to

turn a scowl into a fixed smile.

About thirty minutes later, a waiter met a cigarette girl toward one side of the long bar. "How's it going, Jean?"

"Lightning would strike the punters before they threw their money away. And you?"

"Absolutely, I never knew how tightfisted people could be. The tips should let me recoup my initial outlay in a year or so."

"You're a real tips man, aren't you? See that door, beyond the other side of the bar?"

"Partially hidden by the large potted plant, growing in that cheap, bakelite pot?"

"That's it. Two fellow employees were buying cigarettes. Say, have you noticed how staff like us are invisible to the public?"

"Tell me about it."

"Anyway, they mentioned a big profit to be squeezed from a dumb punter at 11 o'clock."

"That's only 5 minutes from now. I'll meet you..."

"Hey, you two," growled the bartender, "Snakehips don't pay us to chew the fat." We



Old Snakehips liked to supplement his income by fleecing the punters.

swam our different ways into the tide of cigar smoke.

I managed to avoid the calls of "Waiter" and the waived hands and arms that endeavored to get my attention. So this was how waiters did it - hmmm, not too difficult. At one minute shy of 11 o'clock, I once more met with my cigarette girl.

"What's the worst?" I asked her, "the cost of smoking or the damage to your health?"

"The straps on your shoulders that carry this ridiculously heavy tray. No, this sub-stewardess outfit that's an open invitation to butt pinchers. You?"

"Knowing that the drinks I serve are so watered down they couldn't be legally sold as water. That and a sub-penguin outfit that's an open invitation to butt pinchers."

"Think we can keep the rigs when this gig's over?"

"Let's see them try to stop us. It's show time." I turned the handle and we marched in. One standing goon and one sitting victim. While I closed the door, Jean drop-kicked Snakehips to the frayed carpet. At last, he'd found the right level in life.

"If you even so much as consider getting up, you can kiss your trumpet goodbye," she insisted, while glaring at the instrument where it

hung from a coat hook on the far wall. Right next to the lockers that contained our street clothes. He complied. After all, he performed with it in public most nights. I spied the gun on his desk and slipped it into a pocket of my waistcoat.

"You, scram," I instructed the startled young man who sat trembling in the chair. "But mind that you wear your trilby low and don't move too fast. Go on, scram." He scrambled good and slow.

"My set starts soon, they'll be looking for me. If you leave now, we'll forget that this... unfortunate misunderstanding, ever happened." Jean gave me a questioning glance.

"Here's the deal," I said, turning the key that locked the office door. "Now we escort you out the back way, right down to the precinct. There you confess and feel much, much better."

"But, what about the next set?"

"Guess the boys in the band will have to split their fee three ways instead of four. It's a hard life, being a musician." I put on my trenchcoat and Jean slipped into her lilac jacket with the faux, pink fur collar. The rest of our gear we carried under our arms. Outside, in the alley, the rain accompanied another trio while they finished their evening performance. ☿



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Angel in His Sights

by Ron Fortier

*The skies above the Great War were its final
and strangest battlefield.*

David Marigold opened to the door to his room at the Grande Hotel and greeted his old friend with a smirk. It was a long, I've-been-on-the-train-six-hours smirk that matched his bleary eyes and two day old growth of stubble.

"You look like hell, mon ami," bubbled Pierre Levesque, bureau chief for the Paris branch of the United News Agency.

"And you are as annoying as ever," Marigold shot back, towering over the long nosed Levesque, who's bald head couldn't quite meet the other's chin. "The Trans Atlantic Underwater Tube may be the fastest way here, but it sure as hell plays havoc with one's sleep."

"Which is why I prefer the luxury of the zeppelins. It may take a few days, but one always arrives relaxed and well rested." The

height differential didn't stop the smaller man from grabbing the American journalist in a smothering hug.

"It is so good to see you again, David. We've all missed you at the office."

"I know and I've missed Paris. Now if you'll let me breathe again, let's have some coffee. I had some sent up when you rang you were coming over."

Once back in the room, Marigold gestured to the sofa and the coffee urn on the rectangular table. There were two cups, cream, sugar and a half dozen cinnamon flavored pastries. Seeing the treats, Levesque tossed his associate the folder he'd been holding and dropped onto the sofa.

Marigold looked into the folder, trying to keep

his eyes open long enough to focus properly.

"So this is it, huh?" he said reaching into the folder for the small manuscript inside. "The story about the angel being shot down in Belgium."

Mouth filled with half a pastry, Levesque nodded and chewed.

Taking a sip, he nodded vigorously and found his voice. "Yes, the account as set down by one Francois Couture before his death six weeks ago. His granddaughter transcribed it and then called to asked if I'd be interested in the story.

"Ha. As if any journalist worth his ink would not be interested in such a tale. It's incredible!"

Pacing around the sofa, Marigold looked from his old friend to the thin papers in his hand. "Are you saying you believe this?"

"Why not sit down and read it for yourself. It's not very long."

Marigold shrugged. Why not? It was evident Levesque wasn't going to leave until he did. He sat back in the overstuffed chair opposite the Frenchmen and looked down at the first, neatly typed page in front of him.

"Alright. Pour me a cup of that coffee and then try to be quiet. I'll read it and then we'll see."

See what, his mind asked. Hell, none of this could be true.

No way. Marigold began to read.

FROM THE MEMOIRS OF FRANCOIS COUTURE

My name is Francois Couture. I am an old man who does not have much time left in this world. It has been a good life and God has been kind to me. Still there is the matter of the angel and now, before it is too late, I must tell of the events that occurred during the spring of 1918 over the skies of Belgium.

Events that to this day remain as strong and vibrant as if they had only happened yesterday.

I was nineteen and a pilot for the French Royale Squadron. The war had been raging for several years and air combat was the new battlefield of the Twentieth Century. Of course, I and my comrades of the Eight Squadron, the Falcons, believed ourselves invincible and day after day took to the skies in search of our rivals, the skilled German Aces.

It was early April that the following occurred. I recall this because Von Richthofen, the one they called the Red Baron, was shot down the 18th of that same month and his death com-

pletely demoralized the Germans. It more or less was the beginning of their defeat. Thus the incident I am about to relate predated his death by several weeks.

The skies were particularly clear that morning as we took off from our base in Lyons. Commander Armand Boucher was our Squadron Leader and as was protocol, took his position at the front of our airborne file. The air was cold and all of us were wrapped in woollen underwear from head to toes. Gloves covered our hands and scarves held off the bitter chill from assaulting our faces. Still the cold crept under our goggles and found our eyes causing them to water. Thankfully, once the sun was at its zenith, her warming rays dispelled the awful cold. We pushed eastward towards the land of our foes.

I loved flying in those days. We all did. It was an adventure every time we took those old crates up. So much thin paper skin and wire, with engines that were sorely put upon by the forces of gravity. And yet the rewards were worth any of the risks.

Forgive me for digressing. All I have are these memories left to me. I will try to remain on the subject at hand.

After three or four hours we began to wonder if our sortie was going to be fruitless. It often happened that we didn't meet any enemy ships and simply turned around and went home. But this wasn't to be the case. Just a little after noon, my wingmate,

Jacques St. Onge, began signaling to his right. As I looked to where he was pointing, I spotted the familiar cigar shape of a German observation balloon. At last we had a target for our guns.

Commander Boucher turned the nose of his Nieuport 17 towards the enemy blimp. Cocking my machine guns, I scanned the skies nervously. The Germans did not send up their balloons alone to be sitting ducks. Sure enough, just as we were swooping down for our initial attack, my eyes caught glints of light coming from my left. Light reflecting off of propeller metal. I jerked my head about and there they were, six gray and red German Albatross D. Vees.

I pulled out of formation, knowing my wingmates would eventually spot my actions and follow suit. Once engaged with the enemy planes, the dirigible became a nonentity no longer worth our attention. Now we were in real combat with fighters capable of matching our speeds and firepower. As the Germans broke formation, each to seek out their own targets, I put my sights on the leader and went for him.

To my right I caught a hasty glimpse of St. Onge's ship coming up to join the fray. As in all such encounters, it soon became every man for himself.

If you have read accounts glamorizing the so called dog-fights between flying aces, let me correct those lies. A dog-fight was an insane, chaotic dance with death as you and your opponent fought both against the air and your fragile ships to eventually out do the other. More often than not, victories came from pure luck or ridiculous accidents such as ships crashing into each other. So focused were you on your own contest, it was impossible to be aware of where others were at any given time in the battle.

On this occasion I remember climbing up to meet my foe. His bullets rained down past my head and I returned a salvo of my own. Then when it seemed we were going to collide head-on, he veered off and dropped below me. Hurriedly I pulled into a roll and tried to pursue, all the while my ears being accosted by the sounds of bullets and whining engines all around me. There was an awful explosion to my right and suddenly chunks of metal slammed into my rear fuselage. I found myself cutting through a thick black cloud of flames and smoke. In a second I was through and could hear the wreck of the plane falling behind me. Who was it? One of ours? I couldn't tell. I was too busy trying to stay alive.

The engagement raged on. I managed to find some free sky and turned to reassess the situation. Just as I was coming about, something flew past my nose and my eyes widened in shock. It was a wing. A giant white wings to be exact. I shook my head and frantically wiped a gloved hand over my oil-smeared goggles. What had I seen? A seagull of gigantic proportions? Some duck from the North country? These kind of things happened, but never in the middle of a battle.

I came around and saw it again. Only now the image that crystallized numbed my fevered mind. A man, naked, with huge wings, flying between our planes. His body seemed to be bathed in some kind of golden glow as if every ray of the sun was caught by his skin and trapped there. Suddenly the angel jerked wildly and I knew it was being hit.

Commander Boucher and a German fighter were exchanging salvos and the angel seemed to simply glide across the path of their bullets. I saw feathers ripped asunder and his face... his golden, unbelievable face, screamed as he folded into himself. Boucher stopped firing and

pulled out, while the German, still confused, continued his barrage. I don't think he even knew what it was he was shooting. Then, as if it simply could not maintain its glide, the angel plummeted downward.

In that instant every gun went silent and all of us looked to the fallen object as it diminished to a twinkling speck below.

It disappeared in the forests along the banks of the Niber river.

I was dumbfounded and didn't know what to do next.

Neither did anyone else. For next several minutes we all buzzed around like bees who've lost their hive and don't know where to go. Then, the German squadron leader made a signal and broke off. His men followed and they flew away. Boucher did the same and we too proceeded to return to our base. It was only then that I noticed we had not lost anyone in the engagement. But somehow that fact didn't matter all that much. All I could see was the angel and how we had shot him down. Or was I simply going mad? Looking to St. Onge and the others around me, it was clear to see, if I were going crazy, I was not doing it alone.

Once back in Lyons, Boucher ordered us into the Command Barracks to discuss what happened away from prying eyes and unwanted ears. Once indoors the clamoring began as all of us began speaking at once, each trying to drown out his mates with his own excited account. Boucher jumped on a footlocker and yelled at us until some semblance of order returned. There was a special fire in his hard blue eyes that always seemed to settle us as a unit. Call that a gift of leadership. He had it in abundance and he never needed it more than on this occasion.

Again, forgive an old man his failing memories. Recalling exact words is impossible and really unimportant. The gist of Commander Boucher's words were this. We had all witnessed something unnatural in the skies. Something that had flown in our firing paths and been hit. At this point several of the men began screaming that it was not a thing, but an angel. Others said they were mad, that it was the sunlight playing tricks on their eyes. It must have been a big bird. Back and forth the arguing went until finally, everyone turned to Boucher for his opinion. He shrugged and said it was foolish to continue without hard evidence. To that end he proposed an unauthorized morning junket back to the river to locate whatever it is we had downed.

By unauthorized, I mean we were soldiers in

a war. We did not have the casual liberties to take up our planes and go off whenever the fancy struck us. We had missions to fly and orders to maintain. What Boucher was suggesting was to be a clandestine sortie into enemy territory without authority from our superiors. Because of that fact, he decided he would only take two others with him, myself and St. Onge. Some of the others grumbled a bit but the truth was, Jacques and I were his senior pilots and the others could not superimpose their wishes over the simple matter of rank. That done, the meeting broke up and Boucher suggested the three of us retire early. Who knew what new surprises the next day would bring.

Thus the following morning, in the inky blackness just before dawn, Boucher, Jacques and I took off for the western horizon. As day dawned in the heavens around us, it was gray and filled with storm clouds. Luckily the winds were manageable or we would have been forced to give up the flight. Luckily we encountered no other patrols, allied or German and by mid-morning had reached the sight of the previous day's encounter.

Below the river wound its way through the forest where the angel, or whatever, had last been seen. Boucher flew over the sight several times and then indicated, with hand signals, that we proceed along the river's course. He was looking for some place to put down. Eventually the water led us to a small valley and several open meadows wide enough to accommodate our needs. There we landed and taxied our ships to the woods' line, hoping the overhanging tree limbs would afford them some concealment for a while. Once on the ground, Boucher drew his pistol and we did likewise. This was Jerry country and we had no idea what kind of ground troops might be in the vicinity. Hurriedly we ran into the woods and started back along the riverbanks making for the area Boucher had mentally marked as he surveyed it from the air.

The day's gray clouds delivered on their promise of foul weather and soon we were traipsing through a curtain of steady, cold rain. I began to wonder if all we were going to get for this madcap venture was a case of pneumonia. Jacques, coming up behind me, was cursing softly under his breath, as the dirt beneath our feet mutated to a cloying, thick mud.

Oddly enough it didn't take us all that long to find the angel. Of course, that is what he was. I would not be telling you this if otherwise. But I remember being very surprised how we just seemed to walk around a large copse of

pine trees and saw that magnificent light. The same light we had seen the day before in the sky. It radiated a warmth I find difficult to properly describe. It was hot to the skin, but not burning, if that makes any sense. As if the heat in the light were able to sink into one's flesh, filling us with a sense of perfect well-being.

The angel was on the ground, lying on his stomach. His huge wings were folded over his inert body like a covering mantle. And the light, the beautiful yellow light shone over him from head to toe. To this day I don't know if the drops of rain even penetrated that wondrous shield of light.

We stood frozen like statues in a museum, our eyes wide and mouths agape, just looking at him. The angel was big, like the lumbermen I'd seen in my village as a boy. Clearly seven feet in length from naked feet to his head, a dome covered by flowing blonde locks that appeared to have been woven from spun gold. His weight accordingly must have been well into the 200 pounds range. With those fantastic wings growing from his shoulder blades, their thousands of white feathers dazzling to behold, I thought moving it... him... could be a problem.

But would we move him at all? Was he even alive? Jacques and I exchanged glances and then crossed ourselves. Having been brought up good Catholic boys, we were no strangers to angels. We'd seen enough pictures of them in our catechisms to know this was one of God's holy messengers. And we had shot it!

Of course, as always, it was Boucher who acted. He holstered his pistol and told us to cover him while inspected the angel for signs of life. I grabbed his arm and tried to caution him. That unearthly glow could be harmful to a mere mortal. Maybe we should all go and get help. Maybe a priest. But he would have none of it. What if it were still alive? We could not waste precious time going for help if the angel needed us now. He put a hand over mine and smiled. He would not be dissuaded and I nodded, letting him go.

Slowly he approached the figure and then knelt by its side.

Carefully he extended his hand out and touched its shoulder. The yellow haze about the angel did not seem to be affecting him at all. Thus relieved, he gently set about rolling the inert form over onto its back to reveal a handsome, comatose visage unlike any I have ever seen before. If any of us had any lingering doubts as to the being's origins, they were dispelled with one look at his face. It was perfec-

tion as only the Creator is capable of. Not a blemish marred that exquisitely chiselled mask.

So lost were all of us in the moment, we failed to hear the footsteps that approached us until it was too late. Half a dozen German soldiers appeared out of the trees around us, each brandishing a pistol or rifle and all of them pointed at us. I spun around and saw we were effectively encircled with no hope of escape. To fight would have been suicide.

One of the Germans, an officer I assumed, screamed something and Jacques and I rightly guessed his intent. We dropped our pistols. As the other soldiers came in closer, Boucher, who hadn't moved from the angel, suddenly gasped.

The glow from the angel was rising up around his own body.

The German officer, a young fellow with Airman's wings on his breast pocket, yelled at Boucher, waving at him with his pistol to get away from the angel. But it was obvious Boucher was in no condition to obey, being that he was somehow being swallowed up by the strange aura. Still, he did not seem to be in any pain, only confused. When the yellow light had completely covered him, he began to relax again. A strange, contented look appeared over him and he actually looked at us and smiled.

He turned to the German officer and asked him to help with the angel. Now here comes the truly bizarre part. Boucher spoke in French, Jacques and I understood him, but so did the German. Was he bilingual or was something else at work here? And the crazy thing is, the German was going over to Boucher and holstering his pistol. Standing over our Commander, the enemy flier studied the angel intently. Again, Boucher lifted a beseeching hand and this time the German replied... and Boucher seemed to understand him. But the man was speaking German!

This strange exchange went on for a few minutes and finally the German crouched down beside Boucher and touched the angel. And just like Boucher, he too was enveloped by the eerie yellow glow. And likewise made somehow different. For, once bathed in the light, he ordered his men to put down their weapons and go bring their truck so they could better transport the angel. He was speaking German. That was what my ears heard, but I understood every word he said in French!

With weapons put aside, the tension broke and Jacques and I breathed much easier. It was clear we were not about to be shot or at least just yet. By the time the foot troops returned with the canvas topped vehicle, Boucher and

the German Officer were acting like long lost cousins. As the ugly, square auto backed into the clearing and stopped, several soldiers started to approach the angel only to have the two men wave them back.

Boucher spoke for both of them and told us not to touch the angel unless we were prepared to have our lives altered forever. Somehow his transformation had given him insights into the being's nature and purpose. It was a pure force of good, he explained to us. Its only reason for existing was to bring peace to our war ravaged world. Because we had somehow wounded it, the angel was incapable of completing its mission. Whereas, even in its coma like state, it could affect others. Change them by completely purging from their souls all evil inclinations. And there in was the rub.

To touch the angel meant forever giving up one's life for the cause of love and peace in the world. There would be no other course for the person thus transformed, ever. That being the case, Boucher, the German officer, and those who chose to follow them, were going to hide the angel in a safe place, away from the armies of the world. A place where he could be looked after until whatever time God chose to revive him and bring him home.

Which is to say, all this talk about God and transformations scared me. I was too young to know my own soul, let alone make a decision that would commit it forever. It was too severe a sacrifice for a young man. This one at least. To my surprise several of the German soldiers stepped forward to join them and so did my friend, Jacques.

I can still remember how he looked at the angel and then turned to me and said he was tired of all the killing. That if there was a way to find true peace in this insane world, he wanted it more than anything else. We shook hands one last time and then he joined them; the angel's disciples.

The rest of it went quickly. They carefully picked up the heavenly being and lifted him into the truck's interior. Just as Boucher and the German officer before, each of the volunteers was baptized by the golden light and changed. I saw Jacques eyes when it was over and it seemed like the weight of the world had been lifted from his shoulders. He waved at me, a grin on his face.

Commander Boucher came over and offered me his hand to say good-bye. Seeing my hesitation, he assured me his own touch would have no effect, other than the simple act of friendship and farewell it was meant to convey. I took

his hand and wished him well and God speed. "Tell them I died," he said and with that he climbed into the truck and they drove off with their fantastic cargo. The remaining Germans and I watched them vanish from view and then, by silent acknowledgement, parted company. Each to return to his own camp and the war.

I never saw either Boucher or St. Onge again although I did, many years later, discover their whereabouts. Included in this account will be certain papers explaining all that. For me, the story is finished. It is all true. I am ready to meet God and ask for His mercy and forgiveness. Please pray for my soul.

Marigold put down the papers and rubbed his temples to ward a burgeoning headache. Tube lag. He needed sleep badly.

"What's this about papers?" he asked Levesque.

"Inside the folder. A brochure. Couture's granddaughter said he kept it on his desk all the time.

Marigold found the folded, dog-eared folder. It was an advertisement for a retreat center located somewhere in the Swiss Alps. A picture on the front depicted a stone abbey surrounded by a sumptuous flower garden through which robed monks strolled. The logo above the photo identified as the Broken Angel Abbey. Under this was the script, Abbot Armand Boucher, Administrator. The folder was dated Aug, 1985.

"Is this some kind of joke, Pierre?"

"Non. I checked. It's a real place. Been around since 1920. Run by a group of monks. They have lots of them in Europe. You know that."

"Right. But how many are run by a former French World War Ace?"

Marigold tapped the brochure on his chin and wondered how long it would take to drive to the Broken Angel.

Three days later, travelling in a Chenaut All-Terrain Steam Car, Marigold and Levesque arrived at the old stone abbey, nestled quietly in the low mountains. It was early Spring and the earth around them was festooned with color. At the front entrance, they identified themselves and made known their reason for their visit.

Ten minutes later they were ushered into Abbott Boucher's office.

"How do you do, gentlemen." Greeted the affable man with the fierce blue eyes and graying hair. "I am Armand Boucher."

Levesque's mouth dropped open like an oven door. "Surely you must be a descendant of the one who flew with Francois Couture."

Boucher laughed merrily. "Non. I am sorry, I do not mean to be so melodramatic, but I have no recourse." He sat down behind a plain oak desk and motioned for them to do likewise. Marigold guessed his age to be no more than forty, forty-five.

"You see, gentlemen, we here can only ever tell the truth. After all, it is our stock and trade. I was once a Squadron Leader in the French Royale Squadron and dear Francois was one of my men. And a very dear friend. I was saddened to learn of his passing."

"But you don't look a day over forty!" Levesque said, verbalizing Marigold's thoughts. "If you were that Armand Boucher that would make you... let's see..."

"I am ninety-nine, Mr. Levesque. And please, before you ask, I am not immortal. I do age. Just slower than most people.

As we all do here at the abbey."

"Because of the angel?" Marigold offered, his reporter's instincts kicking in full tilt. "You have him here, don't you?"

"But of course," Boucher replied slapping his hands together. "This was the safest place to bring him. What with Switzerland's neutrality, we knew he would be protected from the world's chaos. And we were right."

"So you've been here, what, seventy some odd years doing exactly what? Dispensing peace and tranquillity?"

"You are so cynical, Mr. Marigold. Yes, that is exactly what we, I and my fellow brothers have been doing. Offering a small measure of heaven to those who would seek it out. Nothing more."

"Has his condition changed at all since ...the incident?"

"You mean, since we shot him out of the skies? No, sadly not. His sleep continues. Yet so does his mission somehow, through those of us who seen and touched him. For us, there is nothing else."

The cleric's eyes narrowed as if debating whether to say more.

"What?" Marigold's reporter's instinct kicked in.

"Why do you suppose there has been world peace since the Great War, gentlemen? Despite all the political rivalries and petty conflicts, no actual confrontation has occurred since the Armistice. To this day France and Germany remain strong, economic partners in the world economy."

"And you are saying this is because of this place?"

"Yes, Monsieur Marigold. Because the graces that continue to radiate from this place and the

people who've been blessed by that grace. People of all walks of life, who've come, seen and then gone out to convert the world. All because of a single being sent to us from the Creator."

"That's an interesting theory."

"Would you like to see our angel, gentlemen?"

"Right now?" Levesque was so excited, Marigold thought he might fall out of his chair. "You would allow us to see him? Just like that?"

"But of course. Gentlemen, that is why we are here."

Levesque looked to Marigold. The unspoken question was loud in the small room. Marigold wanted to say yes, but the entire story just kept spinning around in his imagination. Not that it was so startling, but that it was sadly real. He remembered Francois Couture's ultimate decision and now understood the man's hesitations. They were all too much his own.

"Go ahead, Pierre, if you want. Me, I'll just

stay here and wait for you."

Another monk, with thin graying hair and a small, lip moustache appeared at the door obviously summoned to be their guide.

"But David, an angel. You can't be serious. We have to go!"

"No, my friend. It's about decisions. Isn't it brother Boucher?"

Boucher rose and indicated the waiting monk. "It always is, Monsieur Marigold."

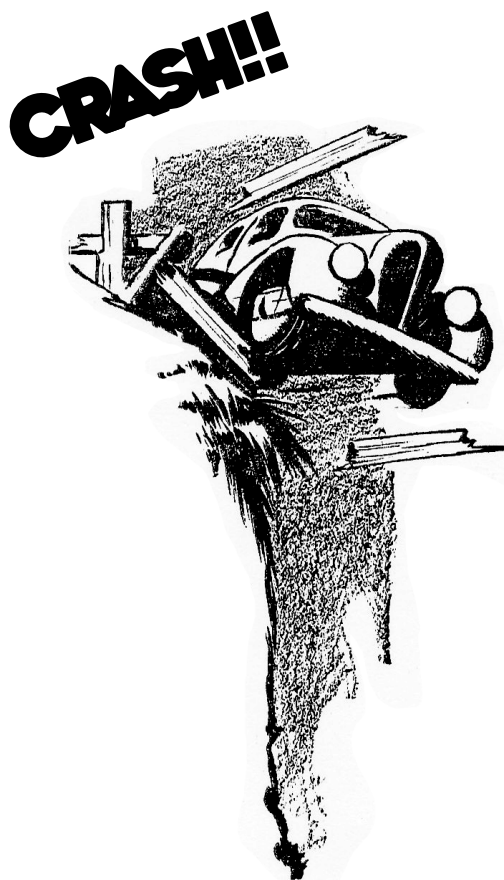
"Go along, Mr. Levesque. Brother Adolf will take you the angel's special room at the abbey's center. Mr. Marigold and I will wait for you here."

"Thank you," Pierre beamed and started after the German brother. As he reached the door, Marigold called out.

"Pierre."

His friend turned. "What, mon ami?"

"Look... but don't touch. Okay?" ☺



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The Kirby Coda: the Rat Ambassador's Treasure

by Jack Draper

The spectre of an opponent thought dead comes back to haunt Kirby, Supernatural Photographer!

I was in the offices of the Daily Pages earlier this week, dropping off some photos I'd taken at a Red Sox-Yankees game. I had this amazing shot of Johnny Gooch stretched out, sliding home, Bill Dickey bent, touching him out, and the umpire over the two of them, his thumb jerked back. Bill had completed a really nice double play on this one and it was a dramatic shot I was lucky to get. It was one of those perfect baseball moments you catch on film one time in a hundred. What's more, in the entire stack of twelve pics I'd snapped, there wasn't a single ghost in any of them. I liked it when the spooks decided to skip the noon game. Meant I was likely to get paid.

So there I was, waiting for my editor, Harvey Bratz, to finish chewing out a copy editor from the society pages. I was chatting with Harvey's secretary, the delightful Imelda, when a phone rang on her desk. She picked it up.

"Harvey Bratz' office... Yes he is, one moment please," she held the handset out to me. "It's for you, Kirby," she said.

I grabbed it from her. "Yeah," I said into the mouthpiece. "This is Kirby."

"Got a minute?" It was Detective Toller's voice on the other end.

"How'd you find me?" I asked.

"I phoned your place. No answer. I knew today's game would be over by now, so I figured where else would you be except trying to make time with your editor's secretary."

"You know me too well."

"You're telling me. Listen Kirby, if you have some time, why don't you drop by my office later on. We found something you might find interesting."

"Oh yeah. What is it?"

"A letter from beyond the grave," his tone was grim, "From a certain ambassador acquaintance of yours."

"I'm on my way," I said and hung up the phone. A shiver ran down my spine and Imelda must've noticed.

"What was that, Kirby?" she asked. "You look like you've just seen a ghost."

"Now Melly," I said, "didn't anyone ever tell you? There's no such thing as ghosts."

The ambassador in question was one Piotr Svendross from the kingdom of Nova Zembla. He and I had an encounter recently. And by "encounter" I mean he tried to kill yours truly by feeding me feet-first to some chemically-altered, carnivorous, lab rats. But, thanks to a little last-minute supernatural intervention by a bunch of angry ghosts, said rats left me alone and did a number instead on Ambassador Svendross and his companions. And by "number" I mean... well, you know what I mean.

It's a long story. Or rather, it's two long stories which I just happened to write down. I call them "The Phantom Plumber" and "Twenty Ghosts on Haunted Avenue." If you haven't read them already, I suggest you check them out or what follows ain't going to make much sense to you.

Less than an hour later I was sitting in the office of Detective Toller of homicide.

"Didn't mean to spook you, Kirby," he said.

I just stared back at him, saying nothing.

"Okay, I meant to spook you." He grinned. "It was just a little joke. I thought you might need a laugh considering..."

"Who's laughing? Over the past month and a half I've been stranded in the New York sewer, attacked by a wrench-wielding plumber, captured by an insane foreign dignitary and his mad-scientist sidekick, nearly force-fed to a pack of radio-controlled rats, then finally rescued by a score of undead hobos. Forgive me if I get a little spooked when you suggest my buddy the Zemblan ambassador has come back from the grave with a message for me. You have to admit that after all I've been through, it at least sounds plausible."

"Okay, I'm sorry. It's nothing like that. Let me assure you, his body is safely on a steamer bound for Zembla. That part of the story is all over."

"Then what's so interesting you had to call me over here."

"Well, we were going through the ambassador's effects and we found this..."

He put a book on the desk in front of him. It was small, bound in leather, and held together by a little strap.

"What is it?" I asked.

"His diary."

"He kept a diary? What kind of master criminal keeps a diary?"

"This one did. It took us a couple of days to get it translated from Zemblan. Mostly its just personal stuff. How much he hates American food. How much he hates his apartment. That sort of thing. But, there are two entries that we found particularly interesting."

He pulled a sheet of paper off his desk and handed it to me.

"February 28, 1933..." I started reading off the top of the page. "That's just a few months ago," I said. "What is this?"

"Seems Ambassador Svendross had amassed a fair bit of wealth for himself. Precious metals. Bank notes. Zemblan artifacts. He was using them to finance Doctor Stantz' experiments. We've recovered most of it, but on February 28 and 29 he writes about a 'golden treasure' that we haven't retrieved yet."

"Golden treasure?" I said. "I like golden treasures. Much better than vengeful ghosts."

"Thought you might. Anyway, we think he wrote these passages as a kind of mnemonic device—"

"A who's-a-what-now?"

"A memory aid. We think he might have feared that he wouldn't be able to recover his prize for a long time and so he wrote clues in his diary about how to retrieve his treasure. We know where he stored it — a safety deposit box at First City Savings — and I can just get a court order to have it opened, but I thought, considering all you've been through, if you were to solve the riddle first and beat us to it... well, let's just say there wouldn't be an investigation."

"Oh yeah? That's mighty thoughtful of you, Toller."

"Well, I know how you like puzzles."

I didn't especially, but that's only because the New York Times crossword didn't promise golden treasure if you finished it. Golden treasure is what a guy like me calls incentive.

I started reading the translated sheet and found that Ambassador Svendross wrote better than he talked. I was going to need a dictionary.

FEBRUARY 28, 1933

It is a fardle I can no longer bear and though it is my last golden treasure from my beloved land of Zembla, it is too dangerous to keep now that our plans come close to fruition. What if we are captured? What if our lair is discovered? Were this heirloom laid bare before the prying eyes of the press, it would be discovered that it is no boon

given to me for faithful service to our nation, but instead merely a souvenir purloined from her *éscritoire*. Such a revelation would be a shame I could not endure. They would make thief of a patriot. Make ill-gotten booty of a tender remembrance. No, I would rather bare it myself and with its point plunge myself into the Beyond than suffer such ignominy.

FEBRUARY 29, 1933

It is done. It is safe. I have made a potaynik of First City Savings. The design of the security boxes they offered suited my purposes. A key can be lost then found and it's lock discovered. Instead, I have encrypted the lock on the box with my beloved monarch's birthdate and first regnal year, and with the birthdate of Nova Zembla's heir.

As I did not want to risk being associated with this transaction, I knew that I could not go to the bank myself. Karlus, that Visigoth, offered to go in my stead but his eyes alone were enough to damn his heart. I always knew Karlus was not one to be completely trusted, and thus I always kept the treasure in its case around him so he could never learn exactly what it is. I realize now that by hoarding it so closely I have only confirmed for him its value and inflamed his desire for it.

In the end, I trusted to the old Zemblan saying that your slippers are never so far away that you must send a wolf to fetch them. I went myself to the bank, in disguise, and the *nom de plume* I used in signing for the security box was concocted to confound the designs of any who sought my trinket—both those close to me and those I could not anticipate. The given name I chose was the very same as that of our beloved monarch. (The costume this necessitated, while provoking laughter from my compatriots, was I thought quite comely upon my frame; and I believe that in my carriage and deportment I was able to fulfil the dignity such an exquisite appellation required.) The surname chosen was the same as the precious item I wished to secret away. A masterstroke I believe, for even if one wishes to secure my treasure by impersonating my masquerade, he must know beforehand what it is that I have hidden.

Ha! Karlus, you ignorant fool, you are thwarted.

"Very interesting," I said as I finished reading.

"I can only give you a 24 hour headstart, Kirby," Toller said. "After that, we're getting the

court order and opening the box."

"I'd better get right on it then." I folded the sheet of paper and slid it into the inside pocket of my jacket. "But first I have to scoot back to the Daily Pages office. See if I can catch the delightful Imelda before she gets off work."

"Why's that?" Toller asked.

"She has a library card." ☞



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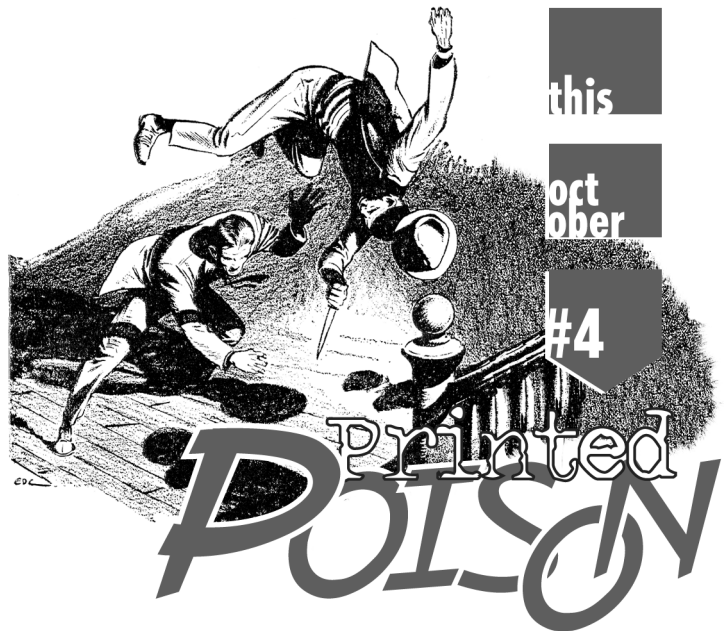
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